

Why are the Asian-American kids silent in class?

Taking a **Chance** with **Words**

■ BY CAROL A. TATEISHI

None of my schools issued uniforms. What I did wear was a uniform in my head which kept me in line, out of trouble. It was a suit which had previously served my two older brothers and had found its way into my closet.

This ensemble of control, restrained the mouth from talking too loud, forbade the mind from questioning established ideas, and encouraged a calm countenance. A kind of mental straitjacket. Taking a chance with words was not expected; it was more in the lines of forbidden. If an urge to speak out ever rose, it was put to rest. Sometimes it would be done by a family member, sometimes it would be done by my own conscience.

—Jeff, fourth-generation Japanese-American 12th grader;
excerpt from an essay for his English class

I received Jeff's essay in a mailing from Joan Cone, an old friend and Bay Area Writing Project teacher-consultant who was teaching at El Cerrito High School in the San Francisco Bay Area at the time. She'd sent it to me mainly to share a powerful piece of writing but also because in my position as director of the Bay Area Writing Project, Joan had worked with me in our project's teacher research program and knew I had long been concerned by what I had noted in Bay Area high school classrooms as a lack of participation by students of Asian descent in the oral language activities of the class. Being Japanese American, this issue was of both personal and professional interest. I was aware that high numbers of secondary teachers whose practice I knew well, shared a belief that classroom talk in a variety of modes is a primary means

by which students make sense of the world and what they are learning. But in conversations with these same teachers and in my visits to classrooms, the silent Asian-American student is a familiar presence. While teachers are concerned about this lack of participation in classroom talk, they are also often relatively accepting of these quiet students who don't pose a discipline problem, who turn in homework on time, and in general, get passing grades.

If we believe that the use of language is key to classroom learning, what might it mean if the class includes Asian-American students, such as Jeff, and significant numbers of them do not participate or participate minimally day in and day out in the oral discourse of the class? How does their nonparticipation in the active talk of a class affect their learning, or does it? Why don't they participate? What do they understand about the purposes of these orally rich classroom activities? What role might their cultures and home language practices play in their nonparticipation? And, does it matter?

My interest in these questions stems

from the fabric of my personal life. Growing up post-World War II in the L.A. Basin, I attended predominantly white schools (my father having bought a house by proxy after the war in an area that discriminated against people of Japanese descent, so there were few of us), but my world outside of school, mainly social life and church life, was mainly among Japanese Americans. I was raised, though, to make my way in the dominant culture, and it started at the dinner table which in my family was a place for talk, orchestrated largely by my dad, sitting at the head of the extra large table he'd built to accommodate six kids. As soon as we all sat down, his questions would start:

"How'd that test go in your math class?"

"Whatever happened to that friend of yours?"

We were a noisy bunch, all vying to keep our dad's attention for that extra minute or two. While this scene may have been common for white middle-class families in the 1950s, it wasn't for Japanese Americans, attested to by my mother, who sat quietly amidst the jabbering, having been raised as a proper Japanese child to not speak during meals. Not that my dad's upbringing was any different. What was different was his intention. The 1950s was only a decade after the internment of 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry and its shadow loomed large over our everyday lives. My dad believed one reason we were "sold down the river," as he would say, was that we lacked leaders who could make our case and resist government forces. *His* children would have the words and the confidence to speak up and use language like full-blooded Americans. And for the most part, we did develop the words and

Carol A. Tateishi (tateish@berkeley.edu) is Director of the Bay Area Writing Project, a University of California at Berkeley program dedicated to improving the teaching of writing in Bay Area schools.

All students names have been changed.



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the confidence, which served us well in school. But as a teenager trying to fit in among my Japanese-American friends, the same rules for speaking served me poorly. As I attempted to negotiate the linguistic borders of school and social life, my conflicting experiences gave me a heightened awareness of culturally patterned differences in the ways people speak and use language.

Now, as an educator, these experiences had taken on an expanded dimension, and I wanted to learn more. Jeff's essay made me think that he would be an interesting student to speak to, and I arranged to spend time in this particular 12th-grade class. Joan and I had talked before about the Asian-American students in her classes, and she, too, wanted to learn more about the ways her students used language.

Snapshots from the Classroom

During a small group discussion on my first visit to Joan's class, I sat in Jeff's

group, which happened to be made up of students who were all of Asian descent. No one spoke for the longest time while students in the other groups chattered away about the story they'd read for homework, following Joan's directions to share what they didn't understand about the story and to get help from others in their group. While I grew increasingly uncomfortable with the silence, the students seemed fine with this extended wait time. Finally, Jeff spoke, followed by Dan, and eventually the three girls in the group spoke briefly in voices barely loud enough to hear. And while it was clear they'd done the homework, their comments skirted the assigned questions, no one eager, it seemed, to divulge what they didn't understand in their readings.

I asked Jeff about this later that day. Jeff, a fourth-generation Japanese American whose father was a dentist and who, with his shock of pink hair falling over his forehead, appeared right at home among his peers, said, "I was

brought up to believe it was a sign of strength to solve your problems yourself and not to impose them on others. It's really hard for me to bring questions about what I don't understand to class to have others help me find the answer." Jeff's response stopped me in my tracks as I immediately recalled learning the same thing at an early age, that silence is a sign of self-reliance and strength. I was surprised at the abiding strength of this cultural value, extending to this young man whose great grandfather would have immigrated to this country at the turn of the century. In talking further with Jeff, it emerged that his reluctance to participate was compounded by the negative attitude in Japanese culture toward verbosity in men, something that he'd also learned at home. However, his answer was a point of concern, knowing Joan's belief in collaborative learning and realizing these particular students were not reaping its benefits.

In my next visit, Jeff was leading a whole-class discussion, for the first time

according to Joan, of “Seventeen Syllables,” a short story by Hisaye Yamamoto that takes place during the 1930s in California’s San Joaquin Valley. Central to the story is the relationship between an Issei (first-generation Japanese immigrant) husband and wife where the wife’s writing of haiku and the social recognition of her talents make apparent the class differences between them, and challenges the husband’s authority within the family. Told from the young daughter’s point of view, the story reveals deep-seated emotions by the father, masked through his silence, and the truth behind her mother’s move to America due to a shameful romantic liaison. The meaning of silence and the father’s inability to express emotions are important themes.

Jeff pulled a desk to the front of the room and started the discussion with a few questions. Soon, other students were answering his questions and raising their own, but they appeared puzzled by the key incident in the story where the father destroys the prize given to his wife in a haiku contest:

[H]e threw the picture on the ground and picked up the axe. Smashing the picture, glass and all (she heard the explosion faintly), he reached over for the kerosene that was used to encourage the bath fire and poured it over the wreckage.

Students wondered why the father hadn’t just talked to his wife. Two of the students felt that the father’s silence and his abruptness with his wife leading up to this incident were inexplicable and undercut the meaning of the story. Jeff attempted to explain the father’s behavior, but it seemed that Jeff was experiencing, himself, the very difficulty he was trying to explain about the father’s inability to use language to reveal his thoughts and feelings. Finally, Jeff said, “That’s just the way the Japanese are,” and he quietly moved the desk back into the row and sat down, frustrated and deflated.

What Students Had to Say

Over time I sat in on Joan’s class often and interviewed five students in depth: Jeff and Dan, both Japanese American; Christina and Sandra, who had emigrated from China when they were in elementary school; and Wanda, who had emigrated from Korea when she was in middle school. (I should add that I had started with one-to-one interviews but switched to group interviews when I found that the students seemed to feel

that they were failing me by the brevity of their responses.)

For these students, speaking in class was not a simple matter. A recurrent theme throughout our interviews was “You’re not supposed to say too much.” Jeff was brought up believing that too much talk could “cause disrespect and harsh feelings,” while Dan viewed negatively students who were “outspoken.” Sandra repeatedly told me that in her family “We don’t talk about feelings,” and gender issues compounded the girls’ reluctance to talk. Christina summarized their experiences: “In my home, women aren’t supposed to speak unless they’re spoken to. It’s just the way I’ve been raised. Girls aren’t supposed to talk out loud in public and it’s just the way I grew up.” And, in direct opposition to the way I was deliberately raised, all the girls said they weren’t supposed to talk at the dinner table. In addition, the three girls, who had entered American schools as English learners, continued to worry about their language skills. Wanda commented that, “I may not be able to speak as well English as other kids, but I’m scared like, oh, probably they’re going to laugh at me . . . so that discourages me from speaking loud in class.”

While all the students tended to be self-conscious about expressing their thinking in class, as our interviews progressed, the students’ views of speaking at home began to take on a number of shared qualities:

- Oral language tends to be used functionally.
- Speaking publicly about one’s problems is discouraged.
- That restraint in talking is valued.
- You don’t talk about feelings or personal experiences.

I was initially surprised that their comments about ways of speaking at home held such commonalities since there were differences among the Asian cultures represented among the students and differences in the features of each of the Asian speech communities. In addition, the students’ families spanned close to 100 years of immigration to this country. It could be that the group interview setting may have contributed to this show of commonalities. Even so, the features singled out above shouldn’t necessarily be generalized to all students of Asian descent.

What is relevant, though, is to examine these speech behaviors in light of Joan’s beliefs about classroom talk that

are very likely shared by many progressive classroom teachers, beliefs such as:

- Oral language can be used to negotiate meaning.
- Risk-taking in talk is valued.
- Speaking in class increases engagement.
- Classroom dialogue deepens learning.

When compared with the students’ views, the exploratory and engaging nature of this kind of classroom talk was a far cry from the students’ ways of speaking at home. In addition, the students had little opportunity to practice or learn about these other ways of speaking in public spaces except in the classroom.

What Students Say Would Help Them

When I asked about what helped or hindered them in speaking in class, the students had definite ideas. They were keenly aware of differences in the socio-cultural expectations for speaking in the home and the classroom, and they were unanimous in their preference for small groups. But they felt a strong need to have group leaders, which corresponds to a point made by Professor Lily Wong Fillmore in a conversation I had with her at UC Berkeley where she spoke of a need by Asian-American students to be “authored” to speak, a concept that makes sense given the hierarchical nature of many Asian-American families. It’s not surprising that students might look to an external authority for permission to speak or feel more comfortable with a set of rules or protocols that in themselves “author” turn-taking in speaking. (I realized, too, that this is what my dad had done for my siblings and me as we were growing up.) The students said they felt they could begin to leave behind their hesitations and self-consciousness when they were asked to speak and when the rules for speaking were clear. They felt in these instances they were complying with an external request and the content of what they said was shaped by that request. As Christina stated, “Maybe sometimes I need someone to ask me to say something instead of me moving myself into the group.”

For the students interviewed, to “just, like, join the conversation” (as Christina put it) was the hardest and most unfamiliar way to participate in small group talk, although they noted that this approach worked for others. They said

they needed help in negotiating the open, unstructured nature of the class discussion groups. For example, they were unanimous in their preference for small discussion groups, but they said a group needed to have designated leaders so that, in Sandra's view, "everyone has an equal chance to speak." At one point, Wanda described an "authoring" structure she liked that Joan had used early in the year: "In the *Shipping News*, the whole class got in a big circle. I said 'pass' because I didn't have anything to say, but everybody had a chance to say pass or speak. That was kind of nice."

The concept of "authoring" also shed light on Dan's debate team participation. I had been surprised to learn that he not only was on the team but also had actively recruited new members and was responsible, according to Joan, for the increased number of Asian Americans on the team. In my class visits, though, Dan had not spoken once in the whole-group discussions and had spoken only minimally in small-group discussions. It seemed that the formal structure of debate with its clear rules for speaking gave Dan the authority he needed to speak, liberated him to do so, and, perhaps, gave him the time to plan and craft his words.

A Lot Less Quiet

So far I have focused on the gap between oral language use in the classroom by the Asian-American students I interviewed and Joan's expectations for it. I would be remiss, however, to leave a picture of black and white differences. Jeff was the one student who seemed to be straddling the two speech communities, and early on provided an interesting insight about Asian Americans and language use when viewed in a historical context.

What I think is that Asian Americans (as a significant percentage of the population) are a relatively new minority. A lot of the time they are kept out of the mainstream or keep themselves out of the mainstream—it's kind of ingrained in you like in that "Seventeen Syllable" story where you have to kind of restrain yourself. At the same time as Asian-American kids are becoming more American, I think there's less of that restraint and so gradually more Asian-American kids and also adults are speaking out more. Maybe twenty years ago or something I'm sure there's quite a big difference compared to now. We're a lot less quiet now.

"A lot less quiet now" is a good way to describe an emerging phase that not only Jeff was experiencing but also one which seems to be just beginning to be played out in Bay Area schools and in San Francisco schools in particular. Based on anecdotal evidence from San Francisco high school teachers, their students are increasingly joining the conversation of the classroom, partly, I think, because they are "becoming more American," but also because of the district's demographics. Close to 40 percent of students are of Asian descent, districtwide, with 31.9 percent Chinese. Numbers make a difference.

While San Francisco and students like Jeff are showing promising changes, what can teachers do right now that might bring students such as those I interviewed more readily into the talk of the classroom where they can experience and practice the intellectual engagement it can provide?

Recommendations

While this beginning list of ideas only skims the surface of what is possible, they address the concerns of the students I spoke with—students who said they were raised to wait to speak out of respect for others, who needed to have a definite turn to speak or needed to be called on in order to speak, who needed better understanding of the academic and intellectual purposes of talk in school settings, and who needed scaffolded practice in venturing into talk that might reveal personal feelings and opinions or provoke argument.

- Be aware and knowledgeable of the cultural barriers some students face in attempting to participate in classroom talk.
- Take the same kind of time and effort to teach effective classroom talk as you might for writing response groups or any kind of classroom collaborative work.
- Model strong and weak discussion groups with mock classroom enactments that highlight the why's of the talk.
- Create stable discussion groups as you would for writing groups. Take care in putting students into groups, helping them build trustful communities over time and sensitivity to cultural differences.
- Designate group leaders and develop clear guidelines and protocols with students for how the group works and how talk is conducted and why.

- Debrief the workings of small-group talk regularly to help students develop greater understanding of the dynamics of classroom talk.

Our challenge is to make the rules and purposes governing classroom talk as visible and explicit as possible so that students can acquire new literacy practices and move easily from one speech community to the next in a code-switching mode, not only for the Asian-American students but for their fellow students who need to hear their thoughts and perspectives.

Final Thoughts

While my inquiry has ostensibly been about teaching and learning, the underlying question is, teaching and learning for what? More is at stake than better learning of the curriculum. There are consequences beyond academia. Already a lack of strong verbal skills is impacting Asian Americans and their communities.

Studies I've looked at point to our underrepresentation in occupations such as journalism, law and the social sciences that require language skills and personal contact and, instead, a concentration in fields where technical knowledge rather than linguistic and social skills are at a premium. Also, the glass ceiling effect is well known among Asian Americans where candidates tend to do poorly in oral interviews where their lack of verbal fluency translates into a perceived lack of self-confidence and necessary supervisory skills.

And my "for what" question brings me back to my father and his intuitive understanding that language is connected to resistance and social justice, that language is connected to action and consequences.

It mattered in the 1940s and matters again today if Asian Americans have the words and voice to speak up for themselves and their communities. It matters if we have lawyers, writers, activists, educators, business leaders, elected officials, and ordinary citizens who understand the power of language and use it.

Right now, Asian Americans are among the fastest growing segments of the population and are expected to grow to 20 million in this country by 2020. It is increasingly important that Asian-American voices, literally, become part of the ongoing dialogue that helps shape and inform who we are. A good place to start is the classroom. ■