

NOTHING TO GAIN

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I could not help noticing recently how ill mannered some Japanese people are. In guide books overseas, Japanese people are described as being "kind and polite". But from what I can see, we're far from it.

One particular attitude among Japanese students has been disturbing me for a long time now. This is the act of talking during class, or "shigo" in Japanese.

I have been teaching English conversation for almost a year now, and I have noticed that on days when my teaching style is inappropriate, there is lots of talking amongst my students... "OK, now everybody, be quiet and listen carefully because I'm going to ask you questions later, OK?"... "Class, I said, 'Be Quiet!'" Classes like these, with talking interrupting me all the time, make me realize just how troublesome "shigo" is. This is not a problem that exists only in my English conversation class. It exists in my university classes, as well as in many other prestigious universities that all of you know quite well; so much so that it has even been taken up as a theme of research by the Democratic Education Association Journal (Minshu-kyouikukyoukai-shi).

Why don't students concentrate and listen in class? Obviously, the dreadful one-way system of class management, where the teachers do all the talking and the students do all the listening, is a big cause. In most classes, the teacher is standing at the head of the classroom just mumbling on and on for ninety minutes gradually losing the attention of his audience. It is no wonder the students start to talk. The teachers are making "shigo" inevitable with their boring, colorless classes. But this does not mean that the teachers are solely responsible for this problem. The students are equally to blame.

These days, many Japanese students are busy with activities outside of school. Whether it be clubs, English conversation schools, or part-time jobs, we are keeping ourselves so busy that we do not have the time to relax and catch up on the latest gossip. So, we use the classroom as our place of rest and as our place of social gathering. Since we are so busy, we do not have any chances to talk with our friends other than the time we have during class. And being the

gregarious group that we are, we go on talking despite the fact that the teacher is conducting a lesson.

I often sit in my classes eavesdropping on my classmates' conversations going on around me. "Oh my God! Did you hear? Ishida Junichi has a 16 year-old son!"..."I heard a rumor that Miyazawa Rie is going out with Mokka-MY Mokka!" Such meaningless conversations! How would you feel if conversations like these were going on around you during your favorite classes? I often wonder why the talkers bother to come at all if they're not going to listen to the lectures. I only wish they would realize what a great threat "shigo" is to the future classrooms of Japan. If we think about it, "shigo" is like a cancer that gets bigger and bigger as time progresses. But instead of growing inside the body, it grows inside the university. First, it infects the individual by weakening the quality of the students; then, it gradually worsens and infects the classroom. In the end, it infects and kills the university as a whole. All that will remain will be the building. The people and the name of the university will decay and disappear into oblivion.

Of course, as human beings, we need to talk as a form of communication. But we must realize that there is a time and place for talking and that there is absolutely nothing to gain and much to be lost from "shigo". There is no gain to talking during class. .NONE. It only inhibits the desire that others have to study and restricts each individual's learning. It only serves to the deterioration of the values which are obligatory to maintain a society, especially the values of respecting others around us. So "shigo" has no upsides - it just causes unfortunate losses.

Today, I have spoken to you about the problem of "shigo" amongst Japanese students, since most of you in the audience are university students. But please keep in mind that this problem occurs not only in a small society such as the university, but also in the bigger society known as the "Real World". Let me give you an example. This past summer vacation, I had an opportunity to watch an okoto show with a group of foreign ladies and Japanese ladies. The Japanese ladies were sitting in the back row, and they began to talk, not caring about the other people. As the talking got worse, the foreign ladies in the front began to turn around with angry and irritated faces saying, "shhh!". Eventually the okoto show became a show of shhh's. Pity, isn't it?

Now, let me recite the "Rules of Conduct" that I believe will be the key to the dismissal of "shigo" from the future society of Japan: John

Wesley, the British clergyman and evangelist will guide me in my words. Now, listen to his words....

Let us do all the good we can, good manners,
In all the ways we can,
In all the places we can, in society,
At all the times we can,
To all the people we can, to the people around us and to
ourselves
As long as ever we can.

If we all follow these rules together, I am sure that soon, we will be able to proudly and honestly say that we are "kind and polite" just as the guidebooks overseas describe us.

And shh...listen Silence. This is not just a negation of noise, it is a positive entity. And it is here today because of the respect which you have kindly given me today.