Thoughts on students not answering questions in Japan:

So between reading This Japanese Life (an outstanding blog), Teach Like a Champion (an outstanding book), and an introduction lesson some random textbook, I can finally explain to myself the problem of students not answering questions in class.

First, the background: Japan is a group society. Standing out and making a difference is how you get ahead and receive praise in the US. Enduring and being harmonious within the group – that’s what gets you that gold watch when you retire from Mitsubishi. In short, being a showoff doesn't work in Japan. This alone explains much of the reluctance to volunteer, and why it is often far easier and pedagogically sound to ask a question, give the entire class time to think about it, and then call on one student to answer.

But that doesn't quite explain the reluctance to answers questions when called on – something that has frustrated possibly every ALT to ever come to Japan. In the west, culturally, not answering a question when asked equates to defiance or idiocy. But when I surveyed my students today to find out “Why do you think some students are quiet when a teacher asks questions?” none of them answered, “because they hate the teacher,” or “because they don’t want to answer.” All of the answers hit at “they don’t understand the question,” “they don’t know the answer,” “they’re afraid to answer/ lack confidence” or “they don’t understand some words [either in the question or the answer].”

Of course every Japanese teacher knows what their students’ silence means. But the students were shocked to learn what it looks like to western eyes (defiance, dislike of the teacher, etc.).

So how did I solve the problem of students not answering? Well, first, I became more sensitive to and patient with my students’ silences. I make sure I am asking very clear questions, only one question at a time, speak clearly, etc. And on their side, a quick explanation of “I don’t understand,” “I don’t know,” “I don’t remember,” “How do you say ~ in English?” and “one more time please,” along with a requirement that they answer within 5 seconds worked like a charm. That cured 98% of my problems.

Of course, sometimes students still don’t answer. A “Do you understand?” is just too vague, so I have to gauge where the confusion is occurring. “What does the question mean in Japanese?” followed by “What is the answer in Japanese?” or some other taxonomy of errors works well. Knowing how far back from the answer to start questioning the student is something I’m still figuring out, but it’s getting easier with experience.

And finally, if they still don’t answer, Teach Like a Champions #1 technique, “No Opt-Out” finishes them off mortal-kombat style. I’ll ask another student for the correct answer, and once it’s out there, I go back and ask the original student. Now they know they have to answer, even if it’s handed to them. I should add though that this isn’t for everyone, and if the student is already socially isolated, this technique will only isolate them more.

The one time a student still couldn’t answer, rather than getting angry like I used to, I very calmly told him to copy exactly what I was saying. That worked, too. The important thing – and it’s VERY hard to remember sometimes – is that they’re still kids, and non-native ones at that. They are going to make mistakes – heck, if they were perfect already they wouldn’t need to come to school – and they deserve a patient and emotionally-stable teacher.