

Why Don't You Speak Up?: East Asian Students' Participation Patterns in American and Chinese ESL Classrooms¹

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Abstract

East Asian students' reluctance to participate in classrooms has been one of the topics frequently addressed and evidenced in research studies. And many factors – sociocultural, psychological, personality, pedagogical, etc. – have been explored. This project adopts ethnographic methods and is carried out in an intermediate ESL classroom at one of the major universities in the United States and in English classrooms at one of the major universities in mainland China. Participant observation, interviews, audio and video recordings are used to collect data. East Asian students' participation patterns, the students' as well as the teachers' reflections and understandings, and the underlying factors of the students' behavior patterns are explored. We argue that, different from previous studies, East Asian students are willing and able to participate actively with supportive classroom climate and contexts that allow them to feel comfortable to speak up. Pedagogical implications are also discussed.

Introduction

Based on the relevant literature, East Asian students are almost always portrayed as reticent speakers and, even worse, passive knowledge absorbers in classroom discourses (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Jin & Cortazzi, 1993; Song, 1995; Turner & Hiraga, 1996). Intercultural miscommunication and misunderstandings often occur between East Asian students (we are referring to East Asian students generally, but we do not mean to stereotype) and their teachers and between East Asian students and their non-Asian peer students because of different patterns of classroom participation in different cultures. Most studies attribute East Asian students' reticence to their inadequate linguistic competence or cultural factors. And other factors such as psychological, personality, pedagogical factors have also been explored (Liu, 2001, 2002). Are East Asian students really, as described in the literature, reticent and passive learners? Are there any other factors besides those documented that inhibit their participation in classroom discourses? What can we do to help them? These questions prod our interest, as East Asian students and ESL teachers, in investigating East Asian students' participation patterns in ESL classrooms in the United States and in China, their own perceptions of class participation, the factors that inhibit their participations in classes, and more importantly, how East Asian students can be helped to get socialized into ESL classroom culture.

Integrative Theory of Cross-cultural Adaptation

In order to adequately accommodate all the crucial elements and their interrelationships operating in the process by which individuals come to grips with a new and unfamiliar cultural environment, Kim (1988) proposed an integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation. In this theory, the term “cross-cultural adaptation” refers to “the process of change over time that takes place within individuals who have completed their primary socialization process in one culture and then come into continuous, prolonged first-hand contact with a new and unfamiliar culture” (Kim, 1988:37-38). According to Kim (1988), a person is assumed to be an open communication system that interacts with the environment through input and output of information. A person has an inherent drive to maintain his or her internal equilibrium in the face of changes in environmental conditions. When the person-environment symmetry is broken, in order to regain internal equilibrium and reduce stress, a person adapts by altering his or her internal conditions. This theory assumes that stress and growth are inseparable and that both are necessary for successful adaptation. Cross-cultural adaptation, which occurs in and through communication, necessitates at least a minimum level of acculturation to the host culture and de-culturation from the native culture. The central concept of this theory is the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic of intercultural communication experiences of individuals coming to an unfamiliar cultural environment. It emphasizes an understanding of the communication patterns in and through which individuals from other cultures experience the host environment. This theory can be applied to the cross-cultural adaptation process of Asian students in the U.S. universities. More specifically, if Asian students want to adapt to the American classroom culture, they need to recognize the differences between classroom communication patterns in their home cultures and the target culture, understand the expectations for classroom participation, and be active participants.

Ethnography of Communication

While Kim’s integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation offers a theoretical framework to understand and explain East Asian students’ adaptation process in U.S. universities, ethnography of communication (EC) provides a methodological framework to trace the context and interactions in the classroom, through which the adaptation process takes place. EC deals with, in general, “what does a speaker need to know to communicate appropriately within a particular speech community, and how does he or she learn to do so?” (Saville-Troike, 2003:2). Ethnographers of communication have been involved in doing research examining communication patterns among groups as well as discontinuities or differences that may exist in behaviors across ethnolinguistic or social groups (e.g., Philips, 1983). Classroom ethnographers, in particular, apply ethnographic and sociolinguistic research methods to the study of behavior, activities, interaction in formal and semi-formal educational settings. And classroom ethnography of communication “emphasizes the sociocultural nature of teaching and learning processes, incorporates participants’ perspectives on their own behavior, and offers a holistic analysis sensitive to levels of context in which interactions and classrooms are situated” (Watson-Gegeo, 1997: 135). This study fits into this framework in the sense that it aims to look at what East Asian students need to know to communicate and participate appropriately in college-level ESL classrooms.

Literature Review

In their study of the notion of culture in L2 university lectures in Hong Kong,

Flowerdew and Miller (1995) cite lecturers' frustration with students' reticence in classes and students' reluctance to give their opinions, even when asked. They attribute this "negative attitude to participation" (p. 358) to the local and academic cultures students operate in as well as the mostly teacher-centered primary and secondary education students have had. Similarly, Song's (1995) experience of teaching reading to East Asian students in American universities illustrates their initial unease with group discussions and the extreme anxiety generated simply by the thought of asking a question in class. Again, culture and previous education are cited as possible factors shaping students' apparent reticent behavior. Another study by Liu and Littlewood (1997), via two large-scale surveys conducted at the University of Hong Kong, claims that students' reticence in classes is largely due to their lack of L2 linguistic competence and their cultural assumption of the role of a learner as a listener and receiver. An interesting finding, though, is that students also express a liking for communicative work at school and a preference for university classes in which students do most of the talking.

Studies which analyze teacher-student interactions in terms of cultural expectations and interpretations have also pointed out East Asian students' passive learning role. For example, Jin and Cortazzi (1993), in a survey of Chinese students and their British lecturers, find that Chinese students are passive about choosing a research topic because their criterion for choosing is based on the needs of lecturers and the department. They also exhibit dependent tendencies and expect to be guided step by step all the way in their learning, whereas their lecturers have very different conceptions about these matters. Another example is Turner and Hiraga's (1996) study of the effect of different cultural assumptions on academic tutorials. They find that Japanese students in Britain appear passive and unwilling to engage in dialectic and analytic discourse in tutorials and suggest that Japanese academic culture, which values the demonstration rather than transformation of knowledge, could be the cause of students' passive behavior. In a similar vein, Scollon (1999), in her research study done in classrooms of Chinese students in Hong Kong, speculates that the differences between Chinese students' reticence in classrooms and Western teachers' expectations can be related to differing philosophical assumptions concerning communication, teaching, and learning. Tsui (1996), based on the classroom action research project reports by 38 ESL teachers at the University of Hong Kong, claimed that students' low English proficiency and fear of making mistakes, teachers' intolerance of silence, uneven allocation of turns, and incomprehensible input to be the factors that cause Asian students' silence or reticence in class.

There seems to be an increasing body of evidence which paints a largely passive picture of East Asian students. But should we infer from these observations, as Flowerdew and Miller (1995) do, that students adopt a "negative attitude to participation?" Although these studies on East Asian students' classroom participation are informative and interesting, they have several limitations. First, when the focus is on how professors expect students to participate, their peers' roles tend to be ignored. Second, the majority of the studies conducted in class used simple observation or survey formats. Seldom did researchers solicit students' own perceptions and interpretations of their own class participation via in-depth interviews. Third, the studies tended to focus on the behavioral aspect of students' communication and interaction in class. The non-verbal aspect of students' participation was not explored.

A very good attempt to fill in these gaps is a recent study done by Liu (2001, 2002). He has done a multicase study, through participant observations and interviews, on East Asian

students' communication patterns in content courses in U.S. universities. He finds out that not all East Asian students are reticent and passive learners. He claims that there are mainly five categories of factors inhibiting East Asian students' participation in U.S. content courses, namely cognitive, pedagogical, affective, sociocultural, and linguistic factors. His study focuses on East Asian students in content courses on graduate levels, comparing East Asian students with mainly American students.

This paper looks at East Asian students' participation in ESL classrooms in the U.S. and mainland China, with comparisons between them and their non-Asian peer students. The following research questions are explored:

1. How do East Asian students participate and interact in ESL classrooms in the United States and in China?
2. What are East Asian students' perceptions of classroom participation?
3. What are the possible factors that underlie East Asian students' classroom participation patterns?
4. Under what conditions do East Asian students feel willing and comfortable to participate in class?
5. What are the pedagogical implications?

The Setting and Data Collection in American ESL Classroom

This part of data collection was carried out in Level III oral communication class (OC III) in the ESL program at Southside University² in the U. S. because (1) we would like to study an oral communication class where there are a lot of oral interactions between the teacher and the students as well as among the students, since our aim is to look at East Asian students' oral participation in classrooms, and (2) we would like to observe a class, taught by an English native speaker, in which the majority of the students are Asian. The class meets every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for an hour and half. The teacher, Mrs. T, has received her Master's degree from Southside University and has taught in this ESL program since 1999. The class meets in a small classroom. There are 13 students with ages ranging from 19 to 35, the information about them is provided in the table below.

Student's Name ²	Gender	Country or region of origin/Native language
Mark	Male	Turkey / Turkish
Mary	Female	Mexico / Spanish
Janet	Female	Brazil / Portuguese
Xin	Male	China / Chinese
Ling Ling	Female	Taiwan / Chinese
Jin	Female	Korea / Korean
Ping	Male	Korea / Korean
Haki	Male	Japan / Japanese
Meng	Male	Japan / Japanese
Ying	Male	Japan / Japanese
Yong	Male	Japan / Japanese
Soo	Female	Japan / Japanese
Giang	Female	Japan / Japanese

Table 1 Information of student participants

Participant observations (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Spradley, 1980) have been carried out in the class with audiotaping and fieldnotes once or twice a week for one semester. Li was introduced as a researcher interested in observing the class and doing research in ESL teaching and learning. Her presence in class did not seem to be taken by the students as intrusive because she already knew several of them as her former students and often she was at the back of the classroom, observing and taking notes, although she was an acquaintance to most of them. What needs to be mentioned is that Mrs. T was sick for a week, so she asked Li to take over her class since she was already familiar with the class and the teaching content, which made her role shift from a participant observer to a participatory researcher. This incident turned out to be a valuable experience and an important portion of this study (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). In addition to participant observations, audiotaped semi-structured interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Merriam, 1998) were done with four students, one from Taiwan, one from Korea, and the other two from Japan. Informal interviews were also done with the teacher and several other students. In addition, all the Asian students' group presentations were videotaped. Therefore, 12 hours of audiotaped classroom participant observations with fieldnotes, 2 hours of audiotaped interviews, and 1.5 hours of videotaped presentations were collected.

What we will mainly focus on in this paper are students' presentations and the whole-class discussions when most of the teacher-student interactions take place.

East Asian Students' Participation Patterns in American ESL Classroom

Excerpt 1 is an example of a typical whole-class discussion scenario in OC III. The teacher is going through the exercises in the textbook with the students. The topic is formal and informal language.

Excerpt 1

- 1 Teacher: Having a meeting at work with several co-workers.
- 2 Ss: Informal.
- 3 Janet (Brazilian): Formal.
- 4 T: Formal? Co-workers? Maybe neutral.
- 5 J: In my job, we are always formal. (She was a lawyer in Brazil.)
- 6 T: In your job? OK. Attorneys have a meeting with other attorneys. Their language is always formal. Good. If you are not sure about a situation is formal or informal, all you have to add is please. And thank you. Two important words.
- 7 J: Excuse me.
- 8 T: Thank you. Excuse me, yeah.
- 9 J: Could I?
- 10 T: Yeah, may I, could I...? And, I am sorry, but...I didn't understand you. OK. Next part, on page 31. Paraphrase No. 1. What is No. 1 about? Just paraphrase. Meng.
- 11 Meng (Japanese): Call a teacher, should call Mrs. or Mr.
- 12 T: OK, right. And that's true too unless the teacher gives you permission. So a lot of young teachers, professors, hip, modern, cool, you know, sit on the table and say, guys, you can call me Jim, or you can call me Bob. Hip, modern, cool professors prefer first names, but ask permission from an older person or professor, OK? So always call the professors by their last name, unless that person gives you permission. OK, No. 2? Ping.

- 13 Ping (Korean): Active participation in class.
- 14 T: Yeah. So what happens sometimes when you don't participate in class? What is the teacher going to think?
- 15 Mary (Mexican): Maybe you are not prepared.
- 16 T: You are not prepared?
- 17 Mary: Not pay attention?
- 18 T: You are not paying attention. Then No. 3. American classroom behavior.
- 19 J: In my opinion, in my country, usually give more time to answer because you always, you think before you answer. You think and you say. And for us, not speak English, before we are able, OK, why or say what I want to say.
- 20 T: Good point. First of all, let me paraphrase. She said, in Brazil, when the teacher asks a question, the teacher gives you more time for you to answer than American classroom does. And the second point is, as second language learner, of course you need more time to prepare what you are going to say. But what happens when you get into American classroom?
- 21 J: Quick...
- 22 T: Yeah, you are going to have to be quick. No.3 tells you this. Answer quickly in American classroom. And sometimes you don't know that answer, you can't just sit there. You have to respond, say something like, "I'm sorry, I don't know the answer." Or "I'm sorry, I need more time to think about it." OK. On page 23. Important language to use in different situations. Speaking out in classroom. In American classroom, if you want to speak out, you don't need to raise your hand. But sometimes you need to raise your hand if there is a large group of people. If you are sitting in the back, you want to say something, raise your hand. So how do you signal if you want to speak to the teacher?
- 23 Mary: Raise your hand.
- 24 T: Raise your hand. Or excuse me. What if you want the repetition of the question?
- 25 Mary: Would you mind repeating...
- 26 T: Would you mind repeating...is polite. Would you mind opening the door? And finally, most importantly, if you don't know the answer to the teacher's question, what do you say?
- 27 Mark: I have no idea.
- 28 T: Add a little bit, I would say a little bit more, I don't really know...Ping?
- 29 P: (5 seconds)
- 30 T: I don't know?
- 31 (laughter)
- 32 T: I don't know. I am afraid I don't really know. I am sorry.

In excerpt 1, it seems that East Asian students do not participate unless the teacher calls on them (lines 10, 12, and 28) and non-Asian students participate voluntarily much more often than Asian students (lines 3, 5, 7, 9, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 25, and 27). In addition, non-Asian students tend to give more expanded answers or comments. And maybe the teacher purposefully calls on East Asian students in order to give them opportunities to participate and engage them in the discussion more. Of all the students' participation turns throughout all the whole-class discussions in the semester, East Asian students initiate participation much less than non-Asian students do and are called on much more. It seems that non-Asian students take the floor much more often than East Asian students in OC III.

East Asian students are also pretty aware of the difference in participation patterns

between themselves and non-Asian students. Ling-ling from Taiwan commented in the interview:

The biggest difference is that Western students, like South American students are very good at expressing themselves and pretty natural in speaking up. But we Asian students are shy and quiet and not like Western students. Because this semester, we have more South American students, Western students. In class, they are more active in participation, compared with Asian students. Asian students are quieter.

What's more, the teacher comments to Li a couple of times that there is definitely a big difference between Asian students and non-Asian students in terms of class participation. Asian students tend to be "mute" and do not seem to be willing to participate sometimes even when opportunities are given to them.

All this information and observation seems to correspond with the portrait of reticent and passive East Asian students documented by relevant literature. However, Li found out on the days when she substituted for the teacher that East Asian students were able and willing to participate very actively. Excerpt 2, part of whole-class discussion – a conversation between her, as the teacher, and Ping – is a typical example of that. The topic for that day is cultural differences, including non-verbal communication and school and classroom experiences. She tells the students that they are all "cultural experts" who are supposed to provide information about their home cultures to the class. All the students are very active and able to give expanded information in group as well as whole-class discussions. Ping is the only Korean student that day, so he is the only representative for Korea. After group discussion, he voluntarily demonstrates some non-verbal behaviors in Korea and explains what they mean, which arouses all the students' interest and starts a lively whole-class discussion. When it comes to the topic about school and classroom experiences in their home cultures, Taiwanese and Japanese students comment that it is the teacher who does the main talk in class and students just listen and do not participate in their home cultures and the teachers will punish the students who give wrong answers, even to the point of physical beating. Then Li turns to Ping to ask what it is like in Korea:

Excerpt 2

33 Teacher: So in Korea, is that the same case?

34 Ping: we are more strict.

35 T: more strict. Stricter?

36 P: hmmm, stricter. Almost cruel.

37 T: Almost cruel? What, what did the teacher do?

38 P: If the student did something wrong, every time hit. This is just nothing, no problem. Just hit, drag, ... (he demonstrated)

39 Mark: Is it still right now?

40 P: I a... don't actually, it was ten years ago. I am not sure today.

41 T: What about class participation?

42 P: If somebody, some student participate too much in the class, every classmate will become hating him. Stopping him. If I talk too much like this, everybody hate me. So I have to keep silent.

From excerpt 1, we can see that Ping seldom participates or even remains silent when he is called on (lines 12 and 28). But on the day when he is the only information-

provider about Korea (Excerpt 2), he is able and willing to not only initiate participation – demonstrate to the class examples of Korean non-verbal communication – but also give expanded answers and comments (lines 34, 36, 38, 40, and 42).

College Students' Participation Patterns in Chinese ESL Classrooms

As to the part of data collection in mainland China, Jia has observed three Oral English classes at North University. She has chosen Oral English classes because in these classes students have more chances to participate actively than they have in other classes. She began observing a second-year English majors' class in the middle of their fourth academic semester. She has been teaching this class Intensive Reading for almost two semesters. She and her students have known each other well. They regarded her as a member of them when she observed in their class—they asked her questions for their activities, were interested in her answers, and let her join their games.

Their Oral English teacher, Peter, is from Britain. He is a young college graduate from Oxford University. He teaches them once a week and each time 100 minutes. The students take this course in a small classroom. There are 17 students in the class. All of them are about twenty years old. Participant observations (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Spradley, 1980) have been carried out in the class with audiotaping and fieldnotes 100 minutes a week for 8 weeks.

Peter adopts whole-class discussions, small-group activities, individual writing activities, and games as his ways of teaching. Excerpt 1 is a part of whole-class discussion. Peter is encouraging the students to discuss what personalities their boyfriends or girlfriends should have.

Excerpt 3

- 43 Teacher: To begin with, what I want you to tell me is: When you are looking for a boyfriend or a girlfriend, what kind of things do you look for? For example, what kind of personalities should a boyfriend or a girlfriend have?
- 44 Catherine: Honest, kind.
- 45 T: What kind of looks?
- 46 Villy: Handsome (students' laughter).
- 47 T: Maybe some other things, qualifications that you are looking for, especially when you are going to get married. Let's see. Boyfriends and girlfriends have the same qualities. What you are going to say makes the difference. What do you think a good girlfriend has in terms of personality?
- 48 Villy: You should ask a boy (students' laughter).
- 49 T: If you tell me then I'll write—it is OK.
- 50 Philip: I think the most important characteristics are kindness and honesty.
- 51 Betty: Independent.
- 52 T: Yeah.
- 53 Panda: Faithful.
- 54 Monica: Humorous.
- 55 T: "Humorous?" I told you this before. We don't often use "humorous" to describe a person. Can you think of another word? It begins with an "F".
- 56 Several students: Funny.
- 57 T: We don't often describe people humorous. A situation, or a story, can be humorous.

- People are “funny”.
- 58 Stella: Responsible.
- 59 Alex: Considerate.
- 60 Catherine: Tolerant, gentle.
- 61 T: What do you really mean by “gentle”?
- 62 Catherine: A gentleman.
- 63 T: That’s rather different (students’ laughter). We say “gentlemanly”. When you say a boy is gentle, you mean that he is not very strong, or a little bit weak. What about looks? If you say it doesn’t matter what a young man looks like as long as he has a good heart, I don’t believe you for a minute (students’ laughter).
- 64 Panda: Beautiful.
- 65 Several students: Lovely.
- 66 T: “Lovely” is often used wrongly by Chinese students because of the translation. What does “lovely” mean in Chinese?
- 67 Several girls: “*keaide*.”
- 68 T: What does “cute” mean in Chinese?
- 69 Several girls: “*haokeai*.”
- 70 T: What are the differences between “cute” and “lovely”? “Cute” is about looks. Someone can look cute. For example, a little boy, or a little girl, looks cute. For a young woman, you can say, “She is cute.” But “lovely” refers to personality. If someone is lovely, you mean he is quite friendly and kind. Say, “She is a lovely person.” That means I really like her. So which one? “Cute”? OK.
- 71 Several students: Healthy, tall.
- 72 Lisa: no long hair (students’ laughter).
- 73 T: Probably it’s different for each person. Anything else for a girlfriend?
- 74 Panda: Slim, long hair (students’ laughter).
- 75 T: Education. You are all university students. Would you like to go out with someone who is not a university educated person?
- 76 Michelle: If he has good personality, I think that is OK.
- 77 T: Maybe for some people it is not so important. For others, it is important. A boy told me that his girlfriend must be a university educated person, who probably has a master’s degree. For boys, is it the same to you?
- 78 Panda: (The degree is) not too high.
- 79 T: I think most boys prefer their girlfriends not more intelligent. What about family? Is your boyfriend’s or girlfriend’s family important to you? Who’s going to say that it is not important at all—“if I am really interested in that person, then I don’t care.” What kind of family do you think is a good family?
- 80 Michelle: Very warm, kind, barely quarrel with each other.
- 81 T: Yes. People don’t argue, especially they don’t argue in front of guests. If they still argue in front of guests, it must be a problem family. What about money? If your family is quite poor while your boyfriend’s family is very rich, will that cause a problem? Is it easy to marry a poor person, or is it quite hard to marry a poor person?
- 82 Several girls: Hard.
- 83 T: If you are not very rich and not very poor, will you try to marry a rich family or it doesn’t matter?
- 84 Several students: That depends.

85 T: What does it depend on?

86 Apple: Depends on if you really love that person.

87 T: So, love is more important than family.

In excerpt 3, the English majors participate actively. Jia was amazed by their active participation in whole-class discussions, small-group activities, individual writing activities, and games. She asked Owen, a student, whether the other second-year English major class (there are two classes in the same year) was as active as they were. In the interview, Owen said:

Sometimes I have to go to my second major class and have to make up for Peter's class in the next room (where the other class is). I saw they are a little more active than our class. They shout and do a lot of gestures in their class.

What he said is proved by Peter's comments about his students' participation: I think in general since I began teaching them, they have become more and more active. Sometimes it depends on the lesson content. The content and the presentation of the content are really important. The content of this lesson is about personalities or characteristics of people. Because I presented it as a kind of looking for a boyfriend or a girlfriend, the title of the lesson made them interested. I could have presented in a very different way. For example, I could say that today we would learn how to describe someone's personality. Because of the structure and the content I think I can make the students more enthusiastic about it.

Thinking that the English majors' participation pattern in their Oral English class may not represent that of the majority Chinese college students, Jia decided to observe some Non-English majors' classes. She observed two Oral English classes which consist of both first-year Aeronautical Engineering majors and first-year Telecommunications majors. They are about 19 years old. For Oral English class, each class meets once a week for 100 minutes. Jia began observing their classes in the middle of their second academic semester and was in their Oral English classes for 8 weeks.

Their teacher, Steve, is a young American in his twenties. Steve taught his students a series of lessons about culture. For example, in one lesson he made his lecture, class discussions, students' activities, and games center around stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, racism, and sexism. He adopted warm-up activities, individual writing activities, small-group discussions, whole-class discussions, games, and debates as his ways of teaching. And his students participated actively in all these activities.

When Jia asked Steve whether his students had ever been quiet and passive in his class, he told her:

You should come at the beginning of this semester—they were just like what you said, very quiet and passive. It takes a lot of hard work to make them active. The teacher has to be very creative and give students interesting topics. To teach an interesting lesson needs a lot of work. The students want to be entertained but you have to make them learn.

From Jia's observations, we can see the significance of a teacher's role. These observations have shown that Chinese students are able to change and participate actively in class. To enable such a change happen, a teacher needs creative work.

What are the factors that make students feel comfortable and willing to participate? What are the factors that underlie East Asian students' participation when they do appear to be reticent? We will turn to these questions in the following sections.

Factors Underlying East Asian Students' Participation Patterns

What needs to be noted is that East Asian students' silence in class does not mean that they hold negative attitudes toward active class participation. All the 10 East Asian students and 3 classes of Chinese students, either in the interviews or in class, expressed their likings in active participation and they believe it is good for their learning. Their participation behaviors in American ESL classrooms are actually affected by a lot of factors, including linguistic competence, sociocultural factors, peer student influence, pedagogical factors, and classroom organization, personality, etc. Furthermore, it is the interaction of all these factors including other potential factors (represented by the smaller oval shapes in Figure 1) instead of a single one of them that is in operation (Figure 1). Also East Asian students' participation is context-specific. In other words, whether they are willing to participate depends on the context.

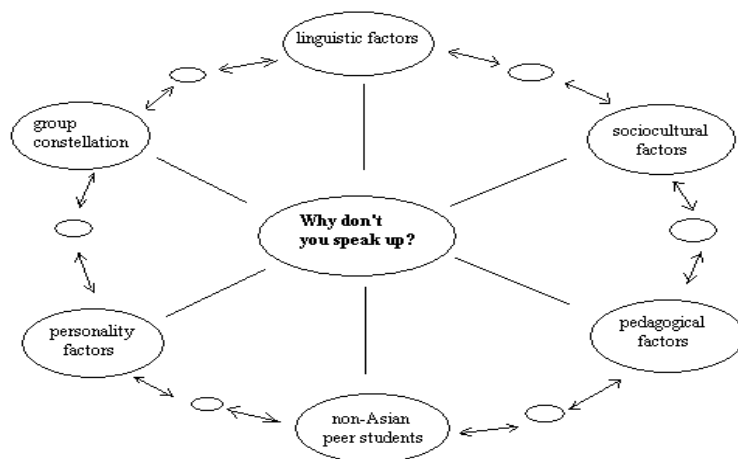


Figure 1 Factors Inhibiting East Asian Students' Participation

Linguistic Competence and Sociocultural Factors

Inadequate linguistic competence has been one of the major factors in literature claimed to inhibit East Asian students' participation (Liu, 2001, 2002; Liu & Kuo, 1996; Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Tsui, 1996). Students also comment that they do not have confidence in their English, so that sometimes they prefer to keep quiet in class. Or they would rather wait and see if somebody else has a better answer or comment.

Sociocultural factors including face-saving strategies, class size, showing politeness and respects to peer students, previous education experiences, etc., are also documented as the major factors that inhibit East Asian students' participation in class (Flowerdew and Miller, 1995; Jin & Cortazzi, 1993; Liu, 2001, 2002; Scollon, 1999; Song, 1995; Turner and Hiraga's, 1996). All the 10 East Asian students in OC III comment that the biggest difference between American classrooms and the classrooms in their own countries is that in American classes, students are required and expected to participate and speak up, while in their own cultures, it

is usually teacher-centered and when the teacher asks a question, students often remain silent. Participation is the main feature in American classrooms. At first, they all felt not used to it because what they expected was to be good listeners in class and learn as much as they could. In Kim's (1988) term, they all experienced stress at the beginning. Also they mention that low proficiency in English and heavy accent make them unconfident and afraid of making mistakes or being laughed at by peer students. Making mistakes and asking a stupid question in class are taken as losing face, and praise from the teacher or others is regarded as gaining face. Many instances of behaviors are results of these cultural factors. For example, students are used to making sure the answer is correct before they give it; students are afraid of making mistakes or asking questions because they are afraid of being laughed at by the teacher or fellow students; students are afraid that their answers are not correct or the best, etc. Therefore, East Asian students seem to have high anxiety level which sometimes inhibits their participation.

Yes, both low linguistic competence and sociocultural factors seem to be the major factors that inhibit East Asian students' participation. But we would like to argue, based on our data, that East Asian students are able to participate and express themselves pretty well if they are willing to do so or when the context makes them feel comfortable to do so. Low proficiency and sociocultural obstacles can be overcome and their adaptation can be accomplished more quickly with the help from peer students, the teacher, classroom organization, and so on.

Non-Asian Peer Student Influence

As discussed earlier, non-Asian students in OC III seem to participate more actively than East Asian students. To some extent, they are modeling active class participation for East Asian students. Meng mentioned in the interview:

Actually I feel at first I am afraid of raising my hand and say something. I just wait for other people, give opportunities to other people, or something...this is what I thought...maybe...but as time goes by, I get used to it...and see other students (non-Asian students) speak a lot...I think, "Oh, maybe I need to say something too...maybe I need to speak up." Then...to build up confidence gradually...gradually have the courage to raise hands and even if I make mistakes, I try to feel that it is not losing face or something. ...

On the other hand, non-Asian students' active participation also, to some extent, serves another function: inhibiting East Asian students' participation. For example, Ling-ling mentioned that sometimes after the teacher puts forward a question, she wants to answer immediately, but her speed of taking the floor is usually not fast enough, compared with that of non-Asian students. Similar accounts also come from other Asian students too. So, Asian students' strategies to take the floor in class seem to be ineffective at times. Maybe the Asian students' wait time before giving answers is still a bit long. Sometimes even half-a-second-longer wait time can result in the loss of the chance to take the floor. Or another interpretation might be different levels of tolerance of silence between East Asian and non-Asian students. Asian people have no problem of long silence in class, while non-Asian people cannot bear silence. Therefore, what often happens in OC III is that right after the teacher asks a question or finishes her turn, a non-Asian student will jump in and start talking. Asian students never cut in and what they do is just to wait for them to finish or wait to be called on (e.g., Excerpt 1). So when East Asian students make efforts to participate more, they sometimes seem to be inhibited by peer non-Asian students' fast speed of taking the floor.

Giang and Ling-ling also mentioned in their interviews that the difficulty of understanding other international students' English is also a factor that inhibits their participation. Because they are not fast enough to take the floor, they have to wait for other students to finish. But sometimes they have a hard time understanding other students' English because of heavy accents. They may get lost easily. They feel uncomfortable to add more because they are afraid that what they want to say is not relevant to the topic. Also sometimes if other students take much time speaking and then the teacher moves on to the next topic, Asian students will lose the opportunity to speak up.

Pedagogical factors

Pedagogical factors, including the teacher's way of teaching, topic selection, content presentation, discovery of what students like and what they really need, classroom organization, group constellation, the teacher's non-verbal behavior, etc., turn out to be very important too. In Peter's and Steve's classes, we can see that a teacher can play a significant role in students' participation patterns.

Students, especially East Asian students, appear to be more active and willing to participate in small-group discussions. But group constellation can make a difference as well. Giang commented that she is not comfortable speaking English when there are more than two Japanese students, including herself, in her group and they often tend to shift to Japanese.

Ling-ling mentioned that the teacher's eye contact and request for students to prepare the text before class are very important in engaging students into participation:

Sometimes she would look at you, and if your eye has contact with hers, then you will automatically want to say something. I feel this way is really very good. For example, she is going to talk about Chapter 2, and you need to preview. In class, she won't explain in detail and then if you have previewed, you will know what the teacher is talking about... because you need to prepare before class, so in class you feel that oh, I know this, so you might want to talk about it. I think this is one way for teacher to encourage us.

Topic selection, ways of presenting the topic, and students' assigned roles are critical as well. In Excerpt 2, Ping is able and willing to contribute to the discussions because first, he is very comfortable with being the only "cultural expert" of Korea. Second, he has a lot to share about the cultural differences between Korea and the U.S. Third, since he is the only representative of the Korean culture, other students including the non-Asian students need to pay attention when Ping starts talking. All these contribute to successfully creating a space for the students to participate.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on all the data in this study, East Asian students sometimes appear to be reticent and silent as described by relevant literature. But they can change. They are able, willing, and comfortable to participate actively and contribute much information to the class when the context allows them to do so. What inhibits East Asian students' oral participation is actually the interaction of all kinds of factors, such as linguistic competence, sociocultural factors, pedagogical factors, peer students' influence, personality, etc. One or two factors cannot explain the whole story. What's more, the analysis of East Asian students' participation cannot be done in isolation without considering the specific contexts. Their cross-cultural adaptation process, stress-adaptation-growth, can be accomplished with their own efforts and the help of the peer students and the teacher. Both the teacher and peer

students need to be aware, at the very beginning, of the cultural differences in terms of class participation and try to accommodate each other. In addition, the teacher can encourage East Asian students to engage more in class oral participation with the help of creative topic selection, discovery of what students like and what they really need, appropriate presentation of the content, consciously creating a space of contribution for them, appropriate eye contact, as well as proper use of request for the students to prepare the lessons beforehand, and so on.

So what we found different from other studies is that East Asian students do not hold a “negative attitude to participation” (Flowerdew and Miller, 1995). Instead, they like it and are able and willing to participate actively. However, one’s intention to perform a behavior does not guarantee its occurrence because circumstances may intervene between intention and action (Ajzen, 1988). Therefore, East Asian students’ intention to participate cannot be put into action without a supportive classroom climate and context or space which allows them to actually speak up in class (Liu, 2001).

Notes

1. Xiaoshi Li collected data in an American ESL classroom, while Xuerui Jia collected data in mainland China.
2. All the names of the students and the universities are pseudonyms.

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