


Chapter 5

Why Don't They Participate in Class?

A Study of Chinese Students' Classroom Participation in an International Master of Education Program

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Chinese international graduate students participate in Canadian classrooms, what factors promote and inhibit their participation, and what approaches can help to improve their participation. Eight student participants and two of their instructors were interviewed individually. Data analysis revealed that all participants appreciated the significance of classroom participation for their learning, but they were quieter than domestic students. Many factors were mentioned that possibly influenced their participation including their English language ability, differing education context and pedagogy between Canada and China, class environment, their personal work experience, part-time job commitments, personal interest, and emotional state. It is critical for instructors to distinguish and observe why their students participate less, then adjust their teaching practice in different situations to improve the participation level.

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INTRODUCTION

With high-quality educational programs and a safe and multicultural environment, Canada has attracted a significant number of international students from around the world (Global Affairs Canada, 2014). In 2018, 572,415 international students were present in Canada at a variety of educational organizations, representing a growth of 16% compared to 2017 and a 154% increase since 2010. Approximately 25% of international students in Canada are from China (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2019). This may be one reason why many scholars have recently focused their research on the study of Chinese international students (e.g., Baker, 2017; Zhou & Zhang, 2014).

While many studies have reported the experiences and challenges Chinese international students encounter on North American campuses (Zhang & Zhou, 2010; Zhou & Zhang, 2014), there has been minimal research particularly focusing on classroom participation among Chinese students. In addition, most past studies focused on international education at the undergraduate level; there is much less research on international students at the graduate level. In our previous study (Zhou, Liu, & Rideout, 2017) of Chinese international graduate students, we explored their experiences and challenges in a middle-sized comprehensive university. Among many other findings, participants reported the differences between Canadian and Chinese classrooms and raised a concern regarding lack of participation in classroom interactions. As follow-up research, this study was particularly designed to explore classroom participation of Chinese international graduate students. The study was guided by three key questions: How do Chinese international graduate students participate in class at a Canadian university? What factors promote or hinder their participation? What strategies may improve their participation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

At the beginning of this century, Liu (2002) pointed out that Chinese international students tend to keep silent in North American classes. There are many possible explanations for Chinese students' silence, but "it is unclear whether their lack of classroom participation is due to their unwillingness, or inability to speak up in class, or a combination of both" (p. 38). He warned that "the speculation that Chinese students are likely to be silent in classrooms could be plainly erroneous and dangerously misleading if the types of social contexts in which silence regularly occurs and the silence is derived from are not taken into consideration" (p. 37). Following Liu's observation, some research has been conducted to explore Chinese students' class participation, which will be reviewed below.

Cultural Differences

Past studies indicate that cultural differences influence Chinese international students' classroom participation. Huang and Brown (2009) pointed out that teachers in China were models for their students, not only in terms of knowledge, but also in terms of virtuosity. 'One day's teacher, a lifetime master.' This Chinese proverb illustrates that students should always respect the teacher no matter how long he/she teaches them. Challenging teachers in classroom is considered impolite in traditional Chinese culture. On the other hand, Huang and Brown (2009) noted that Chinese students often feel shameful when they cannot understand what the teacher is talking about in class. Therefore, it is quite natural for them to keep silent or simply agree in order to pretend they understand everything (Xiang, 2017).

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