

# Improving Class Participation by Asian Students

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## ABSTRACT

*Encouraging Asian students, particularly those with poor English proficiency, to participate fully in university classes has long been recognized as a major challenge. This paper reports on a study into addressing this issue within the discipline Information Technology. The researchers interviewed 20 academics from a Faculty of Information Technology at an Australian University as well as conducting focus groups of 36 local and Asian students. A number of cultural and language factors were identified and several strategies for improving class participation by Asian students were suggested.*

## INTRODUCTION

Participation in class is a valuable teaching method to encourage a more active involvement in learning. However, our experience shows that class participation represents a major problem for many students, especially Asian students, undergraduates more so than postgraduates. Academics in our Faculty often complain about Asian student passivity but to date there has been little research into the promotion of Asian student class participation within the discipline of Information Technology (IT). IT has its own particular challenges:

- a different subject matter
- students who are more focused on technology rather than activities requiring oral or written expression
- larger classes than in the humanities (e.g., 30 in tutorials and labs at the authors' university, with lectures often in the hundreds)
- and high numbers of international students, especially Asian students.

This paper presents the initial findings of an investigation to determine strategies for improving Asian international students' class participation in face-to-face tutorials and small lectures within the IT Faculty at an Australian University. The research focuses on Asian students since they are usually the most under-represented group in class discussion and also because they comprise the majority of international students in the Faculty. The top five source countries for international students at our university are China, India, Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand (F. Guo 2006, e-mail communication, 15 Sep.). Therefore the contribution of this paper will be useful in shaping our knowledge of why Asian students are under-represented in class participation, how Asian students view class participation, what barriers these students put forward for not participating and how we as instructors can overcome these barriers and ensure that participation is worthwhile to all concerned, particularly in cross-cultural settings.

The paper is organized in the following manner: the first sections provide an overview of the literature exploring cultural factors in class participation. Details of the research project and methodology are then stated. The preliminary results of the research are presented. Finally the key points are summarized and conclusions drawn.

## BACKGROUND: EXPLORING CULTURAL FACTORS IN CLASS PARTICIPATION

Erickson (2004, pp 31-32) indicates that:

*"...everything in education relates to culture ... Culture shapes and is shaped by the learning and teaching that happen during practical conduct of daily life within*

*all the educational settings we encounter as learning environments throughout the human life span – in families, in school classrooms, in community settings ..."*

Culturally learned norms, rules and beliefs affect the way people communicate as well as predict the effect of their communication on others. Consequently, both students and instructors will bring their own culture and this will affect their expectation of instructor behaviour, their perception of what is proper classroom conduct, and what they view as appropriate learning methods and goals (Lee & Carrasquillo 2006; Winbush 1995; Kato 2001; and Chu & Kim 1999).

Tierney (1992) states that university reflects the culture of mainstream or dominant society. Accordingly, in Western universities it is believed that class participation is important since it will help to reinforce the curriculum, as well as improve presentation and social skills. These universities are full of their own social conventions, such as rules for class presentations, student attitudes to hierarchy and the subtleties of English usage, which may be unclear or unknown to overseas students (Dunphy 1998).

## Asian Students

Sheehan and Pearson (quoted in Liu 2001) found that Asian students in Western classrooms expect instructors to tell them what to do and they believe that what the lecturer said is the truth. They are taught to follow it to the letter and memorise it, not to question, disagree or speak in the class. They believe that asking questions or speaking up in class is disrespectful. They often feel frustrated when they try to memorise the extensive readings given by the instructor and consequently are reluctant to participate in class.

Asian students prefer to rely on discussions in their own native language with their co-nationals in order to share their opinions or solve problems. They usually do the required pre-reading or activities before class and believe that any questions arising from pre-reading can be answered by a second reading or listening to the lectures attentively, not by asking questions. They experience language difficulties and are uncomfortable speaking up in class (Liu 2001).

When Asian students have questions, they prefer to ask their co-national or other classmates after class rather than asking their lecturer during class. If they have to ask the lecturer, they will try to do it after class (Liu 2001). This preference is affected by their previous experience in their home country. Most Asian countries have large class sizes: if the students ask questions in class, the lecture would not finish on time, and therefore the instructor prefers students to discuss any issues that they have after class.

Asian students also have a different concept of class participation than other students. They believe that class participation is responding to questions, as opposed to actively interacting with peers and asking their *own* questions. Furthermore, they are hesitant to comment on other students' presentations and prefer direct feedback from the instructor, compared to whole class critiques. Consequently, Asian students have become stereotyped as passive and unresponsive in class participation. (Chu & Kim 1999).

Sifianou (1997) states that there is a big difference in how silence is interpreted in Anglo and Asian cultures. Asian people consider that silence is the norm and talk is only desirable if there is something that needs to be conveyed, whereas English-speaking people deem that talk is desirable and is a way to show affection and social interaction.

A pilot survey on Asian students' participation in US universities by Liu (2001) revealed that the main barriers to class participation for Asian students are their belief that being quiet in the class shows respect for instructors. It is also connected to the Confucian concept of face saving by avoiding making mistakes in class and the need to preserve harmony. They believe that silence is an indication that the student is listening attentively and thinking actively. When they do not understand, they expect that other students will speak up and ask similar questions and consequently their issues will be addressed.

Further research by Liu (2001) in US universities found that, even if Asian students understand the importance of participation and want to participate, they often have to wait to get an opening to speak and then they are sometimes interrupted by their American classmates which subsequently silences them. Some American students speak up to fill in the silence because they misinterpret Asian students' silence as meaning they have nothing to say. Other American students interrupt because they want to help and inadvertently take over the conversation.

Asian students, regardless of whether they participate or not in class, agree that class participation is important to engage new ideas and gain knowledge (Liu 2001). However they believe that they can benefit from class participation without actively participating. They learn by listening attentively to other people's interactions. Preparation, knowledge and prior experience affect their participation mode.

These results support research by Tsui (1996) which identified five barriers to class participation:

1. Insufficient English proficiency
2. Fear of making mistakes and being ridiculed by classmates
3. Insufficient time to think (instructors' intolerance of silence)
4. Unequal opportunity to participate
5. Complex language usage by the instructor.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To investigate strategies for improving class participation, particularly with Asian students, we explored:

- Student perceptions and expectations in relation to learning, in particular their attitudes to discussing, speaking and presenting in class;
- Cross-cultural issues and barriers with regard to participation; and
- Teacher experiences and strategies to foster effective participation.

The research followed a qualitative approach: focus groups and semi-structured interviews (McGovern 2003; Morse & Richards 2002).

### Staff Interviews

Twenty academics from the Faculty were interviewed. Staff members were chosen partly on the basis of their availability and willingness to be interviewed, and partly in order to represent a broad cross-section of the various subject areas of IT. Interviewees were also selected to cover the full spectrum of academic levels from part-time tutor and associate lecturer to professor. The interviews were audio recorded and a partial transcription of each interview was undertaken. Interviews were semi-structured and based on a number of questions covering general class participation issues as well as cultural factors.

### Student Focus Groups

Five focus groups were conducted, two for local undergraduates, two for Asian undergraduates, and 1 for postgraduates (combined local and Asian due to insufficient applicants), with a total of 36 participants. Students volunteered to participate by responding to advertisements on the intranet. In each focus group students were asked about their preferred learning style and about what factors affected their participation. Comments by students were organized and typed up during the focus groups.

## RESULTS

### Staff Interview

#### *The Challenges of Asian Student Participation in the IT Classroom*

On the challenge of trying to get all students to actively participate, there was general agreement that a very few people will do all the talking if allowed. With

few exceptions, interviewees agreed that the biggest challenge was getting Asian students to participate because they are:

*a lot quieter and not able to communicate as well – it could be because English isn't their first language; that's obviously going to inhibit them – but there is also the cultural part where they don't think it is appropriate to question the lecturer.*

Several academics believed that Asian students have got an extra hurdle to overcome before they start participating because English is not their first language. The students also have problems understanding the lecturers, especially if the lecturer speaks too softly or uses colloquialisms. On the other hand, the lecturer might also have problems in understanding the Asian student. It has been suggested that one needed to speak slowly and clearly to accommodate Asian students.

Two interviewees believed that lack of English proficiency was not the only factor that hinders Asian students from participating since even using online discussion boards to help them overcome the language issue, as well as being given encouragement, still failed to make them participate.

Several interviewees described Asian students as "culturally shy", very reserved, not used to speaking up and afraid of losing face if they made a mistake. Asian students' upbringing taught them to respect their teacher: therefore, unless the teacher called their name and asked questions, they will not say anything. It is considered disrespectful to question the teacher. In this case, they are very different from Australian students who are much more interactive, dare to get involved and present their opinions.

Several interviewees said that Asian students have different expectations about teaching and learning methods based on their experience in their home countries. They were used to a "more didactic learning space" and unaware of educational practices in Australia. Some academics saw the Asian women students as the most timid about participating: in addition to the reasons already cited, the overwhelming predominance of men in IT classes was thought to be intimidating and create a very masculine atmosphere.

### *Strategies to Promote Class Participation by Asian Students*

There was general agreement that it was "quite a challenge" finding ways of promoting class participation in multicultural classes with mixed race, gender, ethnicity and culture, especially with the increasing number of Asian students. However, there was no clear consensus about the best way of tackling this problem except that one needed to be very proactive. Various approaches were used by different staff members with more or less success. A couple of lecturers talked about the need to clearly convey one's expectations to the students at the beginning of semester so that they knew what was expected of them. For example, when awarding marks for class participation as a method of encouraging the students, they must be made aware of the difference between mere attendance and real participation.

Several staff members noted the importance of openly encouraging students to speak out, and also creating a comfortable atmosphere in the classroom. A number of academics regularly asked students to introduce themselves to the class or to the student sitting next to them as a way of creating activity and getting students over the first hurdle. Other academics recommended asking non-intrusive questions first, not asking them to express their opinions but more to say things that they know. These activities formed an icebreaker and also, because they talked about something they knew better than anyone else, it gave confidence to the Asian students and at the same time provided an insight to others.

Nominating the students by name was also one of the most popular strategies since a lot of Asian students would not participate unless they were directly called upon. Giving Asian students more time to discuss issues with their group first before they have to give their opinions was also mentioned. It gave more confidence and gave them time to formulate the answers in the English language.

Academics used a variety of participatory classroom activities but by far the greatest number recommended small-group discussions, with a representative of each group reporting back to the class afterwards:

*First they have to be in small groups so that they know what they can tell and they can hide behind the group. Specially I think some cultures, they don't dare to express their opinion, but if they have to speak for a group they would do and indirectly give their own opinion.*

Several interviewees mixed students from a variety of cultures through the groups and changed the groups as needed. This spread the good English speakers around, got people to be more aware of other people's cultures and activities as well as got them to learn from each other and made the Asian students feel welcome.

One interviewee suggested a group activity called "Interviewing an expert" in which the student has to be the expert from another country (the country which they originated from). At the end the students who have posed the questions have to present the expertise they have learned to the class.

It was also suggested that group presentations were better than individual presentations, because they provided a shorter amount of time for the audience if the presenter was an Asian student with poor English.

Another suggestion was formative assessment. Early in the semester (weeks 3-5), the lecturer should ask for some written feedback from everyone about how they are finding the class, their comfort level in asking and answering questions, asking for help, etc. This created an inclusive learning space for all students.

### Student Focus Groups

#### *Preferred Learning Style of Asian Students*

There were several commonalities in preferred learning style. While most local students favoured interaction with their instructors and liked to talk and discuss issues, most Asian students said that they preferred Question and Answer at the end of the lecture, they liked to ask questions one on one with the instructor, mostly after class, and they were inclined to study or research individually.

As long as discussion was conducted in small groups, several Asian students liked subjects that required participation because it provided interactions, made the tutorial more lively, helped them to absorb the knowledge and gain other information, forced them to think more widely than the lecture or books, as well as provided opportunities to ask questions and clear any doubts. Getting the correct answer, if there was one, from the tutor after the discussion was seen as important. Some students also mentioned that it depended on the subject and also depended on the work given. One student said that he liked participation if he could ask for help in relation with the assignments, another if it provided workshop support and yet another student preferred practical work in the laboratory.

All Asian students and local students agreed class participation in tutorials was worthwhile. They also agreed that participation helped to clarify their understanding, gave opportunity to learn from each other and get better understanding. It helped to build public speaking skills, assisted in solving problems and answering questions, as well as making it more interesting and enjoyable. Asian students also put forward additional reasons such as: it gave them the opportunity to practice English and improved proficiency, helped them to learn how to interact with the instructor and the class, eliminated the fear of asking, improved the quality of participation skills and helped them to get to know more people. They also emphasized that the participation should be held in tutorials, not in lectures where it would become an interruption.

While they agreed that participation was worthwhile, only one Asian student said that participation was enjoyable. Several students forced themselves to participate because they realized that it was a good training and they will need it in the workplace. They also tried participating because they understood that they will learn more from discussion. Several students also said that they are a bit shy to participate.

#### *Factors that Affect Participation of Asian Students*

Both Asians and Locals said that fear of saying something stupid was one of the factors that prevented them from participating. It also depended on whether they had knowledge about the subject, whether they had prepared for the class, and their own individual mood and personality. If they participated and couldn't be understood, most Asian students said they would feel bad and may not participate again, compared to most Local students who would find other ways of getting their message across. Only three Asian students said that they would probably try other ways such as discussing the matter after class one on one with the teacher. One suggested using email or online discussion boards. Another would try to improve their English and IT knowledge. A third student would try to clarify what they meant, getting some help either from the tutor or other students, or would rephrase the sentences or give examples.

A big factor that Asian students commented on was that they liked to know ahead what information would be dealt with in class and therefore preferred to have the opportunity to prepare by reading. They had additional factors related to lack of proficiency in the English language, which led to lack of understanding, and inability to translate or clarify their answers. Another issue was the dominating player, where class participation was taken over by certain people, consequently providing no opportunity or time for Asian students to participate.

Tutor style, attitude and control of the class were essential as was the timing of the class and the class environment. Some students said that it depended on the quality of the questions, the level of the tutor's preparation and knowledge of the subject, and also whether the subject was interesting. Asian students believed that the instructor should ask questions equally to all students and give feedback and clarification of the material as well as give a summary to enhance student understanding. Asian students also hoped that the instructor would use simple vocabulary and give them more time to take notes. In addition, students wanted their effort in the tutorial to be recognized, for example by being a component of the subject's overall assessment.

### CONCLUSION

This study of Asian students in the field of Information Technology confirms many of the findings that a number of researchers have found in other discipline areas (Lee & Carasquillo 2006, Chu & Kim 1999, Egan 1996). The major findings include that full participation of international students, particularly those from Asia, is hindered by a lack of English language proficiency as well as fear of making mistakes and losing face. Students voiced a strong preference for being given an opportunity to prepare properly for the class so that they could participate more.

An important finding was that all the Asian students involved in the study believed that class participation was worthwhile. This highlights the need for teachers to develop better strategies for including Asian students. The fact that only one of these students actually liked participation also points to the necessity for participatory activities to be enjoyable and less stressful. In addition, teachers should take into account Asian students' preferred methods of participation, for example, having a Question-and-Answer session at the end of class.

Moreover, the research provided a number of interesting strategies to improve class participation with Asian students. A key issue is to match the student and teacher expectations of learning in the class: teachers must clearly establish how the class will be organized and what sorts of activities students will engage in. An effective way to stimulate discussion is to divide the class into small groups: this is less intimidating for students whose English is poor. Spreading the good English speakers around the groups also helps. Some of the academics considered that the cultural backgrounds of the Asian students could be used to enhance the learning of the class rather than being viewed always as a deficit: for example, students can learn about other cultures.

The researchers acknowledge that the grouping together of all Asian students, regardless of their culture or English-language proficiency, tended to generalize the issues in this study and create a monolithic view. The researchers are also aware that there is a possibility that the really shy Asian students might not have volunteered to join the focus groups, thus affecting the results. Future research needs to be conducted to overcome these limitations. Focus groups will need to separate different nationalities and take account of different levels of English ability, for example Indian versus Chinese students.

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