

## Factors Influencing Student Participation in Classroom Interaction

ZHAO Congmin<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

\*Corresponding author.

**Sponsored by** The Talent Cultivation Project for Colleges and Universities Issued by Beijing (GJ2015065).

Received 28 July 2016; accepted 5 September 2016  
Published online 26 September 2016

### Abstract

Student participation in classroom interaction (CI) is a complex behavior, this paper elaborates on the general factors of proficiency level and personal traits and the cultural factors. These factors interact and together affect student participation which shapes the quality and quantity of interaction in the classroom.

**Key words:** Classroom interaction; Proficiency level; Personal traits; Cultural factors

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Zhao, C. M. (2016). Factors Influencing Student Participation in Classroom Interaction. *Higher Education of Social Science*, 11(3), 20-23. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/hess/article/view/8804> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8804>

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### INTRODUCTION

Everything in the classroom happens through the interaction between the teacher and students, verbal or non-verbal. Interaction is an innate quality of classroom learning and permeates the whole class process. The type and amount of interaction can be a determinant of the success of a class.

It is in their interactions with each other that the teacher and students work together to create the intellectual and practical activities that shape both the form and content of the target language as well as the processes and outcomes of individual development. (Hall & Verplaetse, 2000, p.10)

Classroom interaction (CI) is the interaction between teacher and students and among students. Despite the suggestion that the teacher should try to create more opportunities for the negotiation of meaning by adopting certain tasks or activities, there is still the problem of the students non-participation in CI.

Classroom observation never fails to reveal the phenomenon that in some classes even when interaction opportunities are provided interaction will not certainly occur. Student participation in CI is a complicated thing. What is behind the participation of students in CI merits in-depth investigation.

Whether students take the speaking turns directed to them and cooperate or they may initiate turns are determined by many factors. This paper classifies these factors roughly into two categories: general factors and cultural factors.

### 1. GENERAL FACTORS

The general factors bearing on student participation are mainly those that apply to learners in general regardless of the specific cultures they are situated in, such as proficiency level, motivation, character, age, etc..

#### 1.1 Proficiency Level

The proficiency level or the developmental stage of the interlanguage system of the students is an essential determinant of student participation. It is natural that the students will not try to take turns if they are unable to. Even if they try, learners at low proficiency levels are under greater pressure than those at high proficiency levels, because the teacher may find fault with his answer and their classmates may laugh at them if they make foolish mistakes. The proficiency level of the learner poses limits to the quality and quantity of learner participation. It is impossible for beginners with limited linguistic resources to produce large stretches of utterance.

As to high proficiency learners, they are more likely to participate. The relationship between proficiency and participation is difficult to predict. Chaudron and Ellis have reviewed studies on learner participation and made the following comment:

Correlational studies of learner participation are not easy to interpret, as there is no way of telling whether a “participation causes learning” or “proficiency causes participation” explanation is correct when a significant relationship is discovered. ..., suggesting that the preferred interpretation ought to be that proficiency causes participation. That is, the more proficient the learners are, the more they get to participate. (Ellis, 1994, pp.593-94)

Proficiency can be a motivating factor. The more proficient the student is, the more likely he is to participate in CI, but not such a conclusion can be reached that all high proficient learners are active participants or vice versa.

Slimani points out that “the amount of interaction occurring during lessons depended also on the learners’ ability level and the subject studied” (p.202). He has also voiced the view that the less proficient learners may profit more from listening to other learners than participating verbally themselves (qtd. in Allwright & Bailey, 1991, p.133).

Many researchers agree on the point that the encouragement of learner participation should take into consideration the proficiency factor. Allwright and Bailey point out that the learners’ level of interlanguage development “should partly determine the extent to which they should be expected to participate verbally in classrooms” (Ibid., p.149). VanPatten suggests that “the emphasis on whether or not learners should be expected to interact verbally in language classes is largely a matter of their interlanguage development, with different expectations for participation placed on learners at different levels of development” (Ibid., p.147).

Does it follow that low proficiency learners should not be encouraged to speak and then make verbal interactions with peers or the teacher? On this point, there are divergent views.

On one side stands Krashen (1982) who holds a deep belief in the “silent period” which dictates:

It has often been noted that children acquiring a second language in a natural, informal linguistic environment, may say very little for several months following their first exposure to the second language. .... The explanation of the silent period in terms of the input hypothesis is straight-forward—the child is building up competence in the second language via listening, by understanding the language around him. ..., speaking ability emerges on its own after enough competence has been developed by listening and understanding. (pp.26-27)

Krashen further criticizes the formal language classes where the learners are not allowed the silent period but are prompted to speak before they are ready. Krashen’s “silent period” embodies the idea that beginners and

low proficiency learners should not be forced to speak and speaking will come naturally after the building up of enough competence (p.27). The existence of a silent period is very controversial. As far as the argument for the silent period goes, it fails to take into account the role of “pushed output” which, according to Swain (1985), helps the learner to test out his hypotheses and extend the IL system.

On the other hand, there are researchers who claim that even beginners can succeed in participating in interaction. The production of output ought not to be precluded in the first stage of learning, there is always the possibility that the learners at this stage can make plausible verbal contributions to CI if appropriate types of interaction are adopted by the teacher for various classroom activities and that interactions handled cautiously can enlarge the scope of their knowledge and simultaneously build their confidence and strengthen their motivation. However, the interaction with low-proficiency learners should be undertaken with great care. It would do a lot good to them to encourage incessantly and guide them patiently and correct their errors tactfully without arousing bad feelings in them. The success in conducting interaction with this group of learners is crucial to the nurturing of interest and motivation and to the buildup of confidence. Putting aside the proficiency factor, there are still a host of other factors which shape participation.

## 1.2 Other General Factors

The group of learners in the classroom brings to the classroom their personal traits which are reflected in their participation structure, such as character, age, interest, and motivation.

The choice of whether to speak or not is partly determined by students’ character. The extent to which a learner is introvert or extrovert is partly reflected in the student’s participation pattern although the quality of being introvert or extrovert is not something absolute. Extrovert students tend to behave actively: More response to the teacher’s questions and thus more turn-taking although sometimes they are not sure of their answers. Extrovert students are more likely to be risk-takers and dominate the classroom although they are not at high proficiency levels. For many Chinese students, they have a clear idea of the importance of verbal interaction with the teacher or their classmates, yet they tend to be rather passive just because they are not talkative. Brown implies that extroversion may be a factor for the engagement in face to face interaction and the development of general oral communicative competence (1987, p.110).

As to motivation, there are many kinds. Gardner and Lambert recognize two general categories of motivation: the instrumental motivation and the integrative motivation. The former reflects the practical advantage of learning a language while the latter reflects a sincere and personal interest in the people and culture (Gardner

& Lambert, 1972, p.132). Instrumental and integrative motivations are reflected in student participation, but that is not all. As far as participation is concerned, the students may be motivated by different elements. Some are more active because they are interested in the topic or they like the teacher and want to show their friendliness. And there are teachers who adopt the practice of rewarding student participation. Paff (2015) studies the motivational effect of flexible course weighting of the participation grade and finds that grading influenced the participation behavior of only 30% of the students surveyed. This indicates grading student participation does not seem to be very effective in promoting student participation. These instrumental motivations are not stable and not most beneficial to learn. A more constant and strong motivation is the general interest in learning a foreign or second language and learning it well.

When it comes to the age factor, different age groups of learners exhibit different patterns of participation. Participation in public classroom activities is risky, posing a threat to individual face value and self-esteem. Children are less aware of their ego and more likely to be active, usually cooperating very well with the teacher in whole class work and with their peers in the pair and group work. Even when they are inactive they are more liable to become active under the encouragement of the teacher and the influence of his active counterparts. Adults are mature cognitively and affectively and tend to accomplish things independently. Thus they display caution in their participation in class work and may resist group work to a great degree.

Student participation pattern also exhibits cultural variations, in this case cultural factors also need to be considered.

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## 2. CULTURAL FACTORS

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One culture varies more or less from another in student participation behaviour. However, the contrast between Western students and Eastern students seems to be striking and has aroused interest of some researchers. The contrast is most evident in the turn-taking and question-asking behavior of students. For Western students the classroom is a place where they present their ideas and join discussions freely and they feel at home. As to Asian students the classroom is a place confined to many norms.

Sato (1982) conducts a quantitative study of her students' turn-getting behavior, and finds that her Asian learners take fewer turns than the others and have different "bidding" patterns in comparison with the non-Asians. Sato interprets these findings as meaning that Asian learners have more constraints on their notions of permissible classroom participation patterns than do learners from other cultures. Her study raises the interesting issue of the relationship between cultural

traits and interaction patterns (qtd. in Allwright & Bailey 1991, p.133). Brown states that teachers "need to consider cultural norms in their assessment of a student's presumed 'passivity' in the classroom" (1987, p.110).

Student participation behavior is bound by social norms which have long been in existence and are culture-rooted. Students are not free to behave in the classroom, rather they learn the social norms imposed on their behavior through interaction with teacher and peers. Cortazzi and Jin point out: "From an early age, students (and teachers) are socialized into expectations about what kinds of interaction are appropriate in class, about how texts should be used, about how they should engage in teaching and learning processes" (p.196).

These social norms and expectations revolving around student participation are closely related to the deep-rooted components of a culture. Typically in the western society its teaching method is greatly influenced by Socrates.

Dialogue is at the heart of the Socratic method, which is alive today not only as a subject for law students and philosophers but in much of the Western day-to-day experience of discourse inside and outside the classroom. Much of western education is preparation for such events as oral dissertation defenses and other examinations, and ultimately job interviews. (Scollon, 1999, p.15)

The ancient Western culture fostered the tradition of arguing and debating and produced many renowned orators in Greece and Rome.

This is not the case in the Oriental culture. To cite Chinese culture as an example. Chinese culture is deeply influenced by Confucian thoughts which advocate moderation and modesty. One should not be too active publicly and not behave much differently from others for fear that it may give other people the impression that one is being proud by showing off one's knowledge or talent and one does not show consistency with the whole class.

Chinese students hold a deep belief in the important role of the teacher as the transmitter of knowledge and think that they benefit most from teacher talk. Thus Chinese students are accustomed to take the stance of being receptive: They sit there concentrating on listening to the teacher and taking notes accompanied with the occasional nod of the head. As for other activities such as discussion, it is very difficult to turn out to be fruitful.

The Chinese students give the Western teachers the impression that they "seem unwilling to speak; they are passive and rather resistant to pair or group work. They seem oriented to exams and memorization, but not to the process of learning" (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999, p.215). In turn the foreign teachers are considered not helpful in learning grammar except in terms of pronunciation and native use of language. Chinese students think that they do not get much from the class involving foreign teachers because they are asked to play games.

In terms of turn-taking, Chinese students tend not to be so responsive to teacher questions although they know

they can and do not want to give the impression that they are showing off their knowledge. They do not want to take high risks and behave radically for the deep belief that moderation is the golden rule. Cortazzi and Jin make a good summary of the Chinese culture of learning:

Many Chinese students, however, approach textbooks as teachers and authorities .... They expect the teacher to expound the book—they will learn through attentive listening, because the teacher is also an authority and provider of knowledge. ... They hesitate to express this thinking because their culture of learning includes the notion that one cannot really create or contribute something new until one has mastered the field or relevant techniques—that is, after long apprenticeship. Also, they reflect carefully before participating.... Further, they incorporate their care for social relationships into their learning environment, which includes their respect for teacher and fellow students, their concern for “face” issues, for not “showing off,” for group harmony, and so on. (p.215)

It is not uncommon for teachers to encounter a class of Chinese students where the students remain very dull: Their heads are lowered, the expression on their face is rigid and no comment comes from them.

However, the cultural differences of student participation have become less sharp as communication of international language teaching community deepens and communicative language teaching practice is enforced in more countries.

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## CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Student participation is a complex thing, this paper may just capture the most apparent factors. These factors interact and at one time one may be dominant while others are subordinate. In a word, they and other factors together affect student participation which shapes the quality and quantity of interaction in the classroom.

Teachers should introduce varied class activities or projects catering to the needs of students with different proficiency levels, ages, motivations and personalities

and encouraging them to make contributions to classroom discourse and its management.

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