

Students' oral involvement in the Chinese university classroom: A comparison between classes of Chinese and international students

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Abstract

The current research investigates the notion that Chinese students are orally less involved in the classroom as compared to international students. Most of the previous research on this topic focuses on the Chinese students in English language classes or those studying in other countries where the language barrier and foreign culture might influence such behaviour. Using observations, this research compares two Chinese and two international classes in a Chinese university to investigate this issue. The classes were taught by the same teachers, but separately in Chinese and English language therefore eliminating the issue of language barrier and unfamiliar environment. The observations continued for around two months. The findings showed that the Chinese students spoke considerably less as compared to the international students even when taught in their native language and culture. The pattern of interaction in the classroom was also starkly different. Unlike the international students, the Chinese students generally spoke only when asked a question. It was the teacher who controlled the interaction in the classroom. Unlike the international students who were willing to challenge the teachers in the classes, the Chinese students never challenged them during the observations. The teachers also seemed to be more interactive in the international classes.

Keywords: interaction; oral involvement; teacher-centered; students-centered; Chinese students; culture

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1. Introduction

Motivating the students to participate more energetically in the classroom not only greatly improves the environment of the class, but also the students' output and outcome (Halonen, Brown-Anderson, & McKeachie, 2002; Yoder & Hochevar, 2005). Along with helping them in improving their academic performance, it also helps them to become more confident. There has been a lot of emphasis on 'student centered learning', 'active learning' and 'participatory classrooms' (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; O'Neill & McMahan, 2005). One very important aspect of all these teaching and learning techniques is classroom discussion which can excite and stimulate the students to involve more actively in the classes (Bonwell & Eison, 1991).

It has been found out that Chinese students are generally less orally involved in the classrooms. A lot of research has been conducted on this topic which shows similar findings (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Tompson & Tompson, 1996; Miller & Aldred, 2000; Jackson, 2001, 2002). Most of such research focuses on Chinese students' oral behaviour in English language classes or in other countries where the medium of instruction is English (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Tompson & Tompson, 1996; Li, 1998; Jackson, 2001, 2002). The drawback of such research is that it is not possible to find clearly if the differences are due to language barrier and/ or foreign environment; or it is more general attitude of the Chinese students (so called 'Chinese characteristics'). There is not enough research available that focuses on Chinese students' oral involvement and response in the university classes taught in China in Chinese language. Such research would be able to find out if Chinese students are orally less active in the classes even when they do not face language or cultural barriers. This research is carried out keeping that knowledge gap in mind. It is hoped that it will be able to answer some of the above mentioned questions.

The current research uses the term 'oral involvement in the classroom' as it is primarily interested in knowing the students' oral involvement in the classroom. Oral involvement here means the oral interaction stimulated by or based on academic discussions, lectures or questions relating to it. Student to student chatting or gossiping in the classroom which is neither stimulated by nor related to academic discussion or lecture is not considered a part of it.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Importance of Classroom Interaction in Students' Learning and Behavior

As the world is evolving and moving forward, there have been new challenges. These new challenges require new skills and capabilities to meet them. As the requirements and the needs change, the education process and culture change accordingly. Since the last part of 20th century, there has been a shift in the paradigm. The traditional teaching methods which revolved around the teacher and used rote learning and monologue (one-way lectures) are being replaced by 'student centered learning' and 'active learning' (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Halonen et al., 2002; O'Neill & McMahan, 2005; Yodar & Hochevar, 2005). One of the easiest ways of engaging the students in the classrooms more actively is through questioning and initiating classroom discussions (Halonen et al., 2002). It has been observed by the teachers and researchers alike that more active participation by the students helps improving the classroom environment which can lead to better academic performance as well as a boost of confidence for the students. Many researchers emphasized the importance of classroom interaction as it plays a positive role on the students' academic and non-academic improvements. Dillon (1983) pointed out the importance of questioning in the classroom in his paper. Brophy and Good (1986)

talked about different teaching techniques and behaviours which lead to better performance and learning. They recognized the importance of classroom questioning and presented some strategies to ask question more productively such as asking questions which the students can answer correctly.

Research has also proved that better and positive interaction in the classroom leads to improved critical thinking by the students (Smith, 1977). Ryan and Patrick (2001) came to this conclusion. 'Higher order classroom social environment factor accounted for significant changes in all motivation and engagement outcomes' (Ryan and Patrick, 2001, p. 437).

Another of their findings was that if the teachers were supportive of the students and tried to instigate a discussion in the classroom, it would create a positive impact on the students' academic results, emotional behavior and overall social interaction in the classroom. As compared to traditional methods of pedagogy, 'student centered teaching' is also found to be more effective in creating global competencies amongst the students (Wang & Odell, 2002). Zhao et al. (2014) conducted a study about classroom interaction (both teacher to students, and students to students) in the mathematics classes in the Mainland China. They focused on the primary schools. They found out that both teacher to students, and student to student interactions in the classroom had a positive impact on the learning outcome of the students.

2.2 Chinese Students' Oral Involvement in the Classroom

Chinese students' reticence in the classroom is widely reported and researched. Most of such research focuses on either ELT/ ESL/ English language classes or Chinese students' oral behavior in other countries. There is plenty of research on Chinese students' oral involvement in ELT/ ESL/ English language classes (Chen, 2003; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Jackson, 2001, 2002). Their general finding is that the Chinese students are by and large less interactive and orally active in the classroom. They prefer silent listening than participating in the discussion. Cortazzi and Jin (1996) spoke to foreign English teachers in China to know their opinion about Chinese students' oral behavior in the classes. The general consensus was that the Chinese students were laidback and unwilling to speak in the classroom. Flowerdew, Miller, and Li (2000) found that in Hong Kong, most of the teachers found their Chinese students inactive and reluctant to respond to the classroom discussions. Liu (2005) also found the same trend amongst the Chinese EFL students. Other than language problems, Chinese traditional beliefs ('silence is golden'), previous schooling experiences and Confucian philosophy were cited as some of the core causes. Cheng (2000), although acknowledging Chinese (and Asian) students' reticence, does not agree to the notion that it is primarily due to the cultural influence. He argues that the students' inclination to stay quiet in the classroom has more to do with the teachers' behavior, teaching method and language barriers.

Chen (2005) studied Chinese and American students' behaviour and how it had been affected by the respective cultures. It was pointed out that the shyness and reticence amongst Chinese students (especially amongst girls) were not considered weakness, but rather a sign of respect and mannerism. Lu (2013) compared Chinese and American classrooms in her article. Two of the most important differences that she pointed out were the students' relations with the teachers, and their participation in the class. She noted that as compared to American students, Chinese ones were a lot more reserve and formal with their teachers. It was also mentioned that they preferred staying silent, and trying to memorize the lesson.

The above literature review, although answers some questions and reveals the situation to some extent (Chinese students are orally less responsive in the classroom), but still leaves many questions unanswered. As mentioned before, most of the research is about Chinese students' oral behavior in EFL/ ESL classes or Chinese students' behavior in other countries. It can be argued that in such circumstances and situations, the oral behavior of Chinese students would be affected by the language barrier and/ or foreign environment. In their research about secondary schools in Hong Kong, Lo, and Macaro (2011) came to the conclusion that if the medium of instruction in the classroom was changed from first language of the students to the second language, the teaching process would become a lot more teacher centric. Similarly, if a student is surrounded by unfamiliar culture,

environment or people, it might lead to uneasiness and lack of interaction. As a result, such result (in which students use second or foreign language or are studying in a foreign culture and surrounding) does not reveal conclusively if such behavior is by and large a part of Chinese students' learning style and behaviour, or is influenced by foreign language or culture. Lack of such research in Chinese university classes (in China, taught in Chinese language) leaves a huge vacuum in this research area. Through this research, an attempt has been made to reduce this and answer some of the aforementioned questions.

3. Methodology

The research compares the oral involvement of the Chinese and international students in a Chinese university classrooms using observations. It tries to investigate if the Chinese students are indeed less orally involved and responsive in the classrooms (as compared to the international students) even if they do not have language barrier or face different environment. This is done by observing Chinese and international students in separate Chinese university classes. Both groups were taught in Chinese and English language respectively.

An attempt was made that 'other characteristics' of both the Chinese and English taught groups were similar. Both groups were selected carefully. The sample for both groups was taken from the same university and from the same major (education). Also, it was made sure that the same teachers taught both Chinese and international classes so that the results would not be affected by the difference in the teachers' personality and teaching method. Although, one major limitation was the class size. In the university where the research was conducted, general class size for Chinese students is 50+, whereas for international badges, usual number of students per class is 15 to 20. As the researchers tried to conduct research in natural settings (real classroom), a compromised was made on this issue.

Table 1

Sample size and duration for observations

	Group	Number of students	Class observed- times (duration)
Prof. 1	Chinese class	52	6 (around two months)
	International class	15	6 (around two months)
Prof. 2	Chinese class	54	6 (around two months)
	International class	16	6 (around two months)

Two Chinese and two international classes were observed six times each (total 24 observations). The classes were observed for 6 working weeks (over a period of around two months). It was done so that any extreme case might not influence the findings, and the research questions can be answered satisfactorily (Patton, 2002). It was realized during the fourth observation, that the pattern was quite similar. The observations were continued for two more weeks to ensure that the pattern was the same. A Chinese research assistant conducted the observations in the Chinese classes. The main researcher would also be present to double check the frequency (although, he could not note the discussion type). In the international class, both the main author and the Chinese research assistant conducted the observations. Special observation forms were designed for this task which focused on the areas that the researchers were interested to investigate. During all the observations, there were over fifty students. The number given here are on average. In the international classes, the number varied during different observations (14 to 17). On average, there were 15 students in the international classes.

4. Research Findings

As mentioned before, there were six observations from each Chinese and international class (two Chinese and two International classes). All in all, there were twenty four observations. A detailed and comprehensive observation form was designed as the researchers were not only interested in knowing which of the two groups spoke more, but also the type of interactions and response. It also monitored what was said and who stimulated that discussion. Such pieces of information can give a very comprehensive picture of the situation which would make it much easier to depict a real picture. Mobile phone stop watches were used to note down the time.

The observation forms were divided into six categories: how many students spoke, at what time did the students speak (during the first half or the second), total time all the students took (collectively) to speak, on average how much time one student took for speaking, who initiated the discussion (teacher or the students), and the type of oral behaviour or response from the students.

The findings given here are 'on average per class', meaning if 18 Chinese students spoke in 6 classes, the average would be 3 (3 students per class).

The first point that the observations investigated was how many students spoke in a class. The findings reveal that on average three Chinese students spoke from each class which means 5.88% of the total number of students in the class whereas in the international classes, the number jumped to eleven which means that 73.33% of the total students in the international classes participated in the classroom discussions. Another important question was the frequency of the interactions (how many times the students spoke?). The findings show that on average, Chinese students collectively spoke for 6.83 times per lectures, whereas the number was 42.71 for the international students. These numbers are for the whole lecture. Out of 6.83 times that the Chinese students spoke during the whole lecture, 5.33 times (78.04%) the discussion took place during the second half of the class. Amongst international students, the percentage was almost the same: 21.53 times during the second half of the lecture and 21.18 times during the first half.

The next item was the total time all the students took collectively in one class to speak. When the data was calculated, it was found that the Chinese students spoke for 11:16 minutes during the lecture, while the international students spent 26:47 minutes collectively in speaking. When the average speaking time per student was calculated (total time all the students spoke/ total number of students who spoke), the findings were interesting. While much less number of Chinese students spoke, and also the number of times they spoke was also significantly less; the average time one Chinese student took to speak was much longer than the international students (1 minute and 30 seconds for Chinese students as compared to 37.19 seconds for international students).

Table 2

Observation Findings: The number of students and times the discussion took place (Average per class)

	Total number of students who spoke (% of the total students)	Number of times the students spoke collectively	When did the students speak: Times they spoke (%)		Total time the students took for speaking	Average time one student took in speaking
			First Half	Second Half		
Chinese classes	3 (5.88%)	6.83	1.50 (21.96%)	5.33 (78.04%)	11:16 minutes	1:30 minutes (90 seconds)
International classes	11 (73.33%)	42.71	21.18 (49.58%)	21.53 (50.42)	26:47 minutes	37.19 seconds

The next point on the observation form was an important one. It was "who initiated the discussion?" Whether the discussion was stimulated by the teacher or started by the student. The findings show that in Chinese classes, out of 6.83 instances of discussion, an overwhelming majority (80.49%) were initiated by the teachers while only 19.51% of the discussions were started by the students. In the international classes, the trend was completely opposite. Out of 42.71 instances of discussions, 14.14 were stimulated by the teachers (33.11%) while 28.57 (66.89%) were initiated by the students. It also shows that the same teachers were more active and initiated more discussions in the international classes than in Chinese classes (on average 14.14 times in international classes as compared to 5.5 times in Chinese classes).

The last item was the type of oral response. The oral response was divided into four categories (from students' perspective): questions, answers and comments, challenges and non-serious point (but still related to the lecture). The findings show that on average, the Chinese students asked 0.67 questions (9.76% of all the discussions/ responses), answered and commented 5.83 times (85.37%) and made non-serious comment 0.33 times per lecture (4.88%). There was not a single time during twelve observations in the Chinese classes that any

Chinese student challenged the teacher about his or her ideas or subject matter in the classroom. The international students questioned 12.43 times (29.10%), answered and commented 23.71 times (55.52%) and made non-serious remark 1.43 times per lecture (3.34%). They challenged the lecturer 5.14 times per lecture (12.04%).

It clearly shows that when it comes to oral involvement in the classroom, the Chinese students were not only significantly less active in both numbers and duration; their pattern was also very different from the international students. While in the international classes, the discussion was initiated by both the teachers and the students equally, in the Chinese classes, it was almost always initiated by the teachers, and the students only reacted to it. Also, while the international students were willing to challenge the teacher whenever they had a different opinion, none of the Chinese students did that even a single time. These findings validate the previous findings that the Chinese students tend to stay quiet and silent in the classroom.

Table 3

Observation Findings: Instigator and Type of discussion (Average per class)

	Who initiated the discussion		Type of oral response by the students			
	Teacher	Students	Questions	Answer and comments	Challenges	Non-serious
Chinese classes	5.5 (80.49%)	1.33 (19.51%)	0.67 (9.76)	5.83 (85.37%)	0 (0%)	0.33 (4.88%)
International classes	14.14 (33.11%)	28.57 (66.89%)	12.43 (29.10%)	23.71 (55.52%)	5.14 (12.04%)	1.43 (3.34%)

5. Discussion

The findings of the research further confirm the previous findings that the Chinese students are less responsive in the classroom as compared to other international groups. International students spoke almost four times more during observations as compared to Chinese students (eleven international students, three Chinese students per class). If we keep the total number of the class in mind, the differences are even more prominent (73.33% to 5.88% respectively). There were some other interesting observations during the process. Quite a few Chinese students were found using cell phones or even sleeping during the lectures. Sometimes, they would not seem to be a part of the process or were simply uninterested. It is unclear if they did it as they found the lecture boring or because they had already studied the lecture.

This research was carried out to see if the Chinese students speak less even in Chinese taught classes where they have the familiar culture and language. This question arose as most of such research carried out earlier was done in EFL/ English language classes or Chinese students in other countries where unfamiliar language and culture could curtail the Chinese students' interaction in the class. This research eliminated the impact of language and foreign culture to see a clearer picture. Another debate has been about the impact of Chinese culture. Some of the researchers contribute the Chinese students' quietness to cultural attributions (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996; Bond, 1996; Flowerdew et al., 2000; Jandt, 2003; Abubaker, 2008) whereas some other researchers do not agree to this notion (Cheng, 2000). According to Cheng (2000), the differences are more situation based and teacher specific. The current research shows that the reasons seem to be more general than teacher or situation specific. There were two different teachers who taught both Chinese and international classes (two classes each). The oral involvement of both the Chinese classes was the same (passive and reticent). The same teachers when taught international classes, had a lot of interaction in the classes. If the lack of oral involvement of the Chinese students was due to the teachers' attitude as suggested by Cheng (2000), the behaviour of the students should have been the same even in the international class; but the results were not the same. It suggests that the behaviour of the Chinese students has more to do with the Chinese studies' characteristics and learning style.

There was an obvious trend that whereas international students were more proactive in the class (33.11%

discussions initiated by the teachers, 66.89% discussions initiated by the students), the Chinese students were more reactive (19.51% discussions initiated by the teachers, 80.49% discussions initiated by the students). The findings when coupled with 'the types of interaction in the class' draw an interesting picture. It is realized that the Chinese students in the class never challenged their teacher in the classroom: something which is a part of the core culture in China. Jandt (2003) while talking about the influence of Chinese culture and Confucian thinking upon the communicative behavior of the students mentioned that the philosophy given by the great Chinese scholar expected and asked the people for peace and calm in society by respecting those who were elder and higher in social ranking. That means that the young ones should not challenge their elders out of respects. The parents tell their children to respect their teachers and elders and follow them.

This kind of behaviour is not limited to China, but to many other Asian, especially East Asian societies. Abubaker (2008) mentions that many Asian cultures emphasize a lot on harmony in the society. This affects the students' communicative behavior in the classroom as well. Asking many questions and arguing a lot might be seen as a way of disturbing that harmony and disrespecting the teachers. His study found that the Chinese students also had very high level of power distance in their relationship with staff, and high level of uncertainty avoidance. That means that the teachers who are much higher in the status, should be respected and their words (authority) be accepted. Sometimes, even asking the question is considered improper as one is questioning the authenticity of teachers' ideas (especially the questions which challenge the teachers' statement or knowledge). Bond (1996) said the same thing. He said that in Chinese society, teachers were considered knowledgeable and morally correct so the students were supposed to learn from them and pick knowledge from them; not to challenge or question them.

It was also found during the observations that although the Chinese students spoke less in the class, the teachers would ask lesser questions in the Chinese class than the international class. There might be two different reasons here. One, the Chinese teachers are kinder to international students. Even if they ask easy and stupid questions (or challenge the teacher's knowledge), the teachers are more polite and encouraging to them because they do not carry the burden of cultural expectations. The second reason might be that as the international students speak more in the class room and are more responsive, the teachers feel more motivated and comfortable to ask the questions as they know they will get a response, but the question is 'should the teachers be reactive or proactive? Should the teachers be stimulated by students' response or they should try to stimulate the students to respond?'

It was also observed that in the international classes, the discussion was throughout the lecture (although not necessarily initiated by the teachers all the time). In the Chinese classes, the pattern was pretty obvious: the teachers delivering the lecture as monologue and then asking the questions at the end of the class. Another point was that in the international class, there were short bursts of questions and comments by the students throughout the lecture. In the Chinese class, it was more like a formal question answer session where the students would give long, elaborated answers at the end of the class. The process seemed a lot more formal in the Chinese classes.

6. Conclusion

The paper tried to answer a few questions. Do the Chinese students speak or are orally less involved even when they do not face the hurdles of foreign language and unfamiliar culture? If the lack of oral involvement in the classroom contributed to the Chinese students' characteristics and learning style, or it is more teacher or situation specific.

The paper answered these questions to some extent. It was found that the Chinese students respond much less than international students in the classes even when they do not face language and cultural challenges. It comes to the conclusion that unlike what some of the scholars say (Cheng, 2000), Chinese students' reticence in the classroom is not based on the situation or teacher's attitude. It is more general. Culture has a much more

important and prominent role to play in shaping the students' communicative behavior in China. Another argument that can be given is that when Chinese students study with other native ethnic groups in other countries, they speak much less as well. Although, most of those students are supposed to be pretty good in English language so language barrier might not be an issue. The teachers over there also use modern teaching methods and try to involve the students in the classes; still the Chinese students speak much less than other students.

6.1 Limitations and Further Research

The current research has a few limitations. First and foremost, the size of the two classes is not on the same scale. Whereas the Chinese classes which were taken as sample have 54 and 56 students respectively, the corresponding number in the international classes is 15 and 16. The researchers tried to find classes in their natural settings (real university classes working under regular conditions). As 'International classes' or 'English taught program' is comparatively a new trend in China, and is also limited to some universities; there were not enough cases to select from (especially, if one wanted to meet to other important criteria- same university, major, subject and teacher).

This research focuses on the classes from the education major. As the teaching techniques and classroom environment varies from social sciences to pure sciences, the findings might be limited to social science classes. Also, the education major in China is dominated by the females. The sample Chinese classes also consisted of 84% females. It raises the question if the said findings represent only the Chinese female students' oral involvement in the classroom or all the Chinese students (males and females). Although previous research, empirical evidence and informal discussion with both the teachers and the students suggest that this attitude is not limited to the females only, but to all the Chinese students regardless of their gender.

As indicated by limitations, there is a need to conduct further research on the topic. First of all, there is a need to conduct similar kind of research with equal number of students in both the Chinese and international classes. Maybe, a quasi-experimental research to be conducted with two groups especially designed and made to make sure that the other characteristics are similar. As the current sample is dominated by females, there should be research about such subjects or classes which have equal representation of both males and females. Another option might be to observe Chinese classes dominated by the males to see if there are any differences based on the gender. Additionally, this research should be followed by qualitative research to find out the causes of this lack of classroom interaction by the Chinese students. Based on those findings, some suggestions might be given to improve the overall environment of the Chinese university classes to make them more interactive and participatory.

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