“I don’t talk or I decide not to talk? Is it my culture?”—International students’ experiences of tutorial participation

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1. Introduction

The number of international students enrolled in Western English-speaking universities has significantly increased in the past decade. This trend is expected to continue. In Australian universities, it is predicted that the numbers of international students will rise to 810,000 by 2018 (IDP, 2005) and will “increase sevenfold by 2025” (Ryan & Carroll, 2005, p. 4). Eighty percent of these students are non-native English-speaking background international students from Asian countries (henceforth NESB ISAs) (IDP, 2005). Since ‘Asia’ can be divided into five large regions – Australasia, South-East Asia, South Asia, East Asia, and Central Asia – and is classified differently by different people, this study and the research studies cited in this paper refer to ‘Asian students’ specifically from South-East Asia (for example Indonesia, Brunei, and Thailand,) and East Asia (for example Japan, China, and Korea). Therefore, this study uses ‘NESB ISAs’ to refer to non-Anglo-Celtic background East Asian and South-East Asian students who speak their own national language and English as an additional language or dialect and who cross a national border to further their education.

The increasing number of these students in Western English-speaking universities can be a source of challenges to academic staff. In addition to performing their research roles, lecturers and tutors are expected to meet the learning needs of these students, who are “future ambassadors for the country in which they are studying” (Ryan, 2005, p. 147). Academic staff, however, may be unfamiliar with NESB ISAs’ learning characteristics and unsure about how best to meet their needs. Ryan and Carroll (2005) suggest that NESB ISAs need to be perceived as individual learners who come with their own unique set of skills, knowledge, and experiences as acquired in their previous education. However, this has not been the tone of much professional literature (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). This is discussed in the following section.
2. NESB ISAs = passive

Active participation is often associated with an outward manifestation of one's thoughts and feelings or in simple terms, talking (DeVita, 2005; Jones, 1999; McLean & Ransom, 2005). It also seems to be perceived as the 'ideal' classroom behaviour by some lecturers working in English-speaking western universities (Kubota, 2001, cited in Kettle, 2005; Ryan & Louie, 2005). Students who proactively communicate their opinions orally in the class are often perceived as 'active' or 'positive' whereas those who interact less or prefer listening, mostly NESB ISAs, are correspondingly categorised as 'passive' or 'negative' (MacKinnon & Manathunga, 2003). This deficit view of these students is, as Kumaravadivelu (2003) claims, “repeated often in the professional literature, conference presentations” (p. 710), and appears to be “a frequent topic of conversation between Western lecturers about students from Asian countries” (Kember, 2000, p. 99). It is also a “recurring concern preoccupying academics in response to the increased number of NESB ISAs” (Kettle, 2005, p. 50). For example, based on their own teaching experiences with Asian students in Australia, Ballard and Clanchy (1997) describe these students as those who

will sit silently rarely volunteering an answer unless called upon...will be appalled and even ashamed at the brashness of local students who ask questions, contradict, and argue...and maintain the passivity of learning style from their former educational experience. (pp. 16–28)

McLean and Ransom (2005) also express a similar view of NESB ISAs' tutorial participation. They, in fact, criticise a deficit view of NESB ISAs' classroom participation by claiming that “silence can mean engagement in thought, not lack of ideas” (p. 50). Despite this, they still claim that all NESB ISAs are strangers to the Western participatory style of learning. Without advancing any empirical support, the authors state that the concept that “talking is connected to thinking” is a Western assumption which “is not shared in the East” (p. 50). It is the aim of this paper to scrutinise this statement from an empirical perspective.

3. “It’s in their culture”

Shi (2006) claims that researchers holding a view that NESB ISAs are passive learners tend to explain the characteristics of these students from a cultural point of view which often implies that NESB ISAs' culture is inferior to western culture. This can be seen in the following comment made by a lecturer quoted in Robertson, Line, Jones, and Thomas (2000):

Many international students are reluctant to involve themselves in tutorial discussions [because] they come from cultures that have different discourse patterns which are not appropriate in an Australian context (pp. 97–98)

Many research studies (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Jones, 1999; Wen & Clément, 2003; Wright & Lander, 2003) have also adopted this deficit view. For example, Ballard and Clanchy (1997) argue that the cultural roots of the students' "traditional attitudes towards learning [passive learning style]" (p. 17) need to be recognised by the lecturers and that culturally appropriate classroom behaviour needs to be modelled for these students. Similarly, Jones' (1999) study on students' participation in academic group discussion also argue that many NESB ISAs coming from cultures where there is no interaction between teacher and students would find the interactive vigour of the tutorial in western universities strange and disorientating. Thus, one of the lecturer's roles is to "shift their silent behaviour towards talkativeness" (p. 243).

A recent study by Wen and Clément (2003) elaborates these deficit explanations by reviewing what it is in NESB ISAs' culture that has made them reluctant to participate in tutorials. They argue that Chinese students' reluctance to communicate in class is predominantly shaped by cultural values coming from the teaching of Confucian Classics. "For Confucius, the self did not exist as a single entity (Chao & Chao, 1965, in Wen & Clément, 2003, p. 20) and therefore "in Chinese culture, the social and moral process of 'conducting oneself' is to be aware of one's relations with and obligation to significant others" (King & Bond, 1985, in Wen & Clément, 2003, p. 20). Due to this high regard placed on collectivistic value within Chinese society, they argue, Chinese students are excessively concerned about the evaluation of the significant others, and therefore avoid classroom communication. Instead the students attempt to learn submissively from the teacher whom they look upon as the embodiment of knowledge. Wen and Clément (2003) state that the discussion presented in their paper is only a theoretical framework and invites further empirical studies. The present study, therefore, aims to provide understanding of the issue from an empirical perspective.

4. “Is it in their culture?”

A number of other studies have been conducted to challenge the stereotypical image of passive NESB ISAs (Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Cheng, 2002; Kember, 2000; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Littlewood, 2000; Ryan, 2005; Shi, 2006; Wong, 2004). In a study by Chalmers and Volet (1997) that challenges many accepted beliefs about South-East Asian students studying in Australia, South-East Asian participants claim that they do not want their lecturers to assume that the behaviour of not raising questions in class or not participating in class applies to all South-East Asian students. In fact, the participants claim that they do voice their opinion “if something doesn't suit [them] or feel right” (cited in Chalmers & Volet, 1997, p. 92). The participants in this study are also critical about the nature of the participation of local students which they claim wastes valuable teachers' and tutorial time especially when local students make simple statements or ask very basic questions (Chalmers & Volet, 1997). Other recent studies (Cheng, 2002; Kember, 2000; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Ryan, 2005; Wong, 2004).
have found that NESB ISAs from universities in Hong Kong, Australia, and the UK show positive attitudes towards and express preference for a teaching style that encourages independent thought and for a student-centred classroom that allows them to take an active role in their own learning and participate in interactive learning activities.

It cannot be denied that culture, to a certain extent, plays a role in influencing NESB ISAs’ reluctance to participate in tutorials. However, seeing culture as the dominant factor shaping these students’ participation in tutorials is only a partial understanding of the issue. As Jones (2005) and Gu and Schweisfurth (2006) claim, culture is not monolithic or deterministic in its influence nor is it helpful to explain NESB ISAs’ reluctance to participate in tutorials for the reasons discussed in the following section:

4.1. Changes in Asian societies and classrooms

Researchers holding a culturally deterministic view of NESB ISAs’ participation may have overlooked the “profound and dramatic social, cultural, physical, and attitudinal changes that have occurred in East Asian countries” (Ryan & Louie, 2005, p. 7). The claim made about NESB ISAs’ reluctance to participate as being shaped by Confucianism may need to be reconsidered. This is because Confucianism has changed throughout a long history (from 770BCE until 20th century) by adapting itself to new political and social demands (see Yao, 2000, for further discussion). Therefore, it may not be wise to treat the last 2000 years as though it produced a monolithic philosophy still applicable to explain contemporary NESB ISAs’ reluctance to participate in the classroom. In other words, the perception of the teacher as an authority, and the presence of the evaluative significant others which encourages students to become submissive and reluctant to speak may not be the case in contemporary classrooms in some East Asian countries. Using a sample of secondary and tertiary students in English classes in China, Cheng (2002) and Shi (2006) discovered that the majority of these students did not accept teachers’ ideas blindly. They challenged the teachers if they disagreed, and were critical of their teachers, the teaching content, and learning materials and environment. Thus, the perception of non-talking students shaped by their cultural background and/or Confucianism can be inaccurate in contemporary university tutorials. This conclusion is supported by Kingston and Forland (2008).

4.2. Diversity and individual differences

Seeing culture as the dominant force affecting students’ reluctance to speak in tutorials also implies an essentialist view of people from a particular country that overlooks the diversity in any country and/or individual differences. As Holliday (1999) claims, those who adopt a cultural explanation when talking about NESB ISAs’ style of participation in class tend to see culture as relatively unchanging, homogenous, behaviour-defining ethnic, national and international groups with material permanence and clear boundaries in an absolute way. Attributing NESB ISAs’ reluctance to participate in class to their culture will result in “nothing more than a one-dimensional caricature of the learners” (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 714) because it obscures important differences based on religion, class, gender, and socioeconomic background (Ryan, 2006). The cultural explanation of NESB ISAs’ participation has also overlooked the fact that “within all cultures, there are changes, contradictions, and ambiguities [and that] difference occurs not just between, but also within cultures” (Louie, 2005, p. 24). Thus, researchers/teachers holding this view may need to recognise the diversity and complexity within learners’ approaches not only from other cultures, but also within their own (Ryan & Louie, 2005).

5. Contextual/small-cultural approach

Since attributing NESB ISAs’ reluctance to participate in tutorials to culture has been shown to be problematic, an alternative “contextual approach” (Biggs, 1999) or “small culture” perspective (Holliday, 1999), is reviewed and used as a tool to interpret/understand the experiences of NESB ISAs’ participation in tutorials below.

Biggs (1999) argues that another way of understanding NESB ISAs’ learning approach in university classrooms can be developed by looking at the context in which students learn. Holliday (1999) uses the term “small culture”, to refer to “the sum total of all the processes, happenings, or activities in which a given set or several sets of people habitually engage” (p. 248). The classroom in which learning takes place is one of the small cultures which “teachers are co-constructing with learners” (Clark & Gieve, 2006, p. 64). Learning, therefore, is not inherently unchangeable, but can be shaped by the context in which it occurs, what is happening in the classroom and/or the institution in which the class is run, the interaction between members of a classroom, and the ‘learning and teaching culture’ established by the specific interaction of the particular classroom’s members.

In fact, many research studies show a correlation between a teacher’s pedagogical style and students’ learning approach and classroom behaviour (Campbell & Li, 2008; Jones, 2005; Littlewood, 2000; MacKinnon & Manathunga, 2003; Ryan & Hellmundt, 2005; Wong, 2004). For example, Wong (2004) argues that examination-oriented universities tend to have teachers teaching students strategies to pass the examination with an emphasis on testing their ability to memorise and reproduce what they have learnt in activities that reflect the final examination. Therefore, NESB ISAs’ reluctance to participate in Western university tutorials seems to be more “the product of the present colonial education system with its excessive workloads, centralised curricula, didactic expository teaching styles concentration on knowledge acquisition, and examinations emphasising reproductive knowledge” (Pierson, 1996, cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 712) rather than the students’ inherent dispositions.

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The attitude of teachers and how they interact with NESB ISAs within a classroom can also influence students' participation. Biggs (1999) argues that whether or not NESB ISAs participate in tutorials lies in the teaching rather than in the students’ inherent cultural dispositions. For example, in Chinese universities, the conception of a lecturer perceived as a respected authority figure who transmits knowledge to subordinate juniors is not necessarily a myth. However, the typical style of pedagogy is uniformly student centred with lecturers frequently engaging all students collectively in problem solving and showing considerable warmth and a high degree of mutual respect and responsibility (Watkins, 2000). Therefore, NESB ISAs' reluctance to interact in tutorials in English-speaking Western universities may have been triggered by the lack of support, warmth, mutual respect and acceptance, and responsibility shown by the lecturers in the Western universities (Campbell & Li, 2008; Clark & Gieve, 2006). Kettle's (2005) in-depth case study of a student from Thailand studying in an Australian university also had the same findings. She found that the student’s awareness of his failure to legitimised him as a member of the classroom through her pedagogical practice that opened up a space for him to be “audible” (p. 56), he felt he became ‘somebody’ who could participate in the class discussions successfully.

6. The study

Based on the review of the literature above, the questions the present study aims to investigate are as follows:

1. How is ‘participation’ defined by NESB ISAs?
2. To what extent are NESB ISAs strangers to the participatory style of learning?
3. To what extent is ‘perceived’ NESB ISAs’ reluctance to participate greatly influenced by their culture?
4. To what extent is the small culture which NESB ISAs, their teachers, and classmates co-construct influential in tutorial participation?

To address the above questions from NESB ISAs' experiences, I chose semi-structured in-depth interviewing as a means to collect information. This form of interviewing allows a researcher to enter into the inner world of another person and to gain in-depth understanding of the participant’s perspectives (Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Patton, 2002). In addition, since the interview questions in a semi-structured interview are developed around a list of broad topics “without fixed wording or ordering of questions” (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995, p. 65), the researcher has a great deal of flexibility, control, and freedom to pursue certain interview questions as well as to ask further questions in response to any interesting comments that participants make.

I interviewed four Faculty of Arts undergraduate students at a university in Australia. They came from Korea (Hyun), Japan (Asuka), Brunei (Honsiah), and China (Qing), which are the “top sources for Australian international education” (Nelson, 2003, p. 7). These students had been in Australia for a period of time ranging from 1 year to 5 years. Honsiah and Qing were mature-age students and Hyun and Asuka were in their early 20s. All participants had completed the majority of their studies in their home countries. Two participants were studying a second undergraduate degree in Australia. The other two had finished the second year of their undergraduate degree in their home countries and were completing the final year of the degree in Australia.

The students were interviewed individually in English. When transcribing the interview, I did not correct any grammatical errors as it is the informant's account, world, or perspective that is “being sought and highly valued through the words and language that is natural to them” (Minichiello et al., 1995, p. 68). After transcribing and analysing all the interviews, I emailed a copy of the interview to each participant and asked them to read and check the accuracy of the representation of their views in order to enhance validity and decrease possible bias. The participants were then asked to clarify and/or add any points that they had made in the interview through either email or informal face-to-face conversations. The following sections summarise the participants’ experiences of participation in university tutorials and then discuss their views with reference to the literature and the research questions.

7. NESB ISAs’ voices

7.1. Redefining the term ‘participation’

This study asked the participants to define ‘participation’ in light of their own experience in tutorials, so that lecturers could see the validity of their own views of NESB ISAs’ participation in class.

In the first conversations with the researcher, all participants defined participation as doing something or being involved in an activity where one is orally communicating one’s ideas or thoughts with others:

Getting involved in whatever is going on… don’t be onlookers… giving ideas… say whatever you think. (Honsiah)

Not just attending lectures… absorbs the knowledge but for me participating is like I do something during the class… speaking out is the most… that comes up to the mind so if I don’t say anything during the class, I don’t feel like I participate in the class. (Hyun)
Get involved in activity...in a group discussion I speak out and...I talk my opinion. (Asuka)

To enjoy the class...discuss, talk and express your opinions in the class and...not just sits there...you share and discuss your knowledge or ideas with your classmates. (Qing)

These students positively expressed how useful their participation in tutorial was in enhancing their learning and providing them with a deeper understanding of what was being learned in class.

Participation is good because you can get feedback and...show your ability in doing something... (Honsiah)

I can clear out some things that I am not so sure in my mind when I start to speak out. (Hyun)

We can deepen our soul and knowledge. (Asuka)

You can get a better conclusion after that...so, you learn something from that. You communicate your ideas and knowledge and your lecturers most likely try to lead you to some deeper area, so you learn through this process. (Qing)

One of the participants even reported that participation in class is a way to have her “presence in class acknowledged by the others” (Hyun) and to expand her social network in class, so that she has access to a larger number of people from whom she can seek for advice on her study.

In further conversations with the researcher, some of the participants reported that ‘talking’ is only one aspect of participation. Honsiah and Asuka believed that “there is a certain limit” (Honsiah) to how much talking a student can do and argued that “it is not always a good thing to respond quickly because there is a high possibility to make mistakes and you don’t really think about that topic” (Asuka). Therefore, they also recognise other forms of participation:

Listening is also a type of participation because you’re involved in what’s going on, you think what the tutor/lecturer is saying and after that you talk. (Honsiah).

Reading books, research, thinking, and listening of course because you need to listen to whatever your tutors or lecturers say first. Through listening, you thinking, mix it with your knowledge...do research and enlarge your knowledge and then discuss with your classmates or lecturer and then get your conclusion and you deepen your level of the knowledge. (Qing)

Listening to the discussion...is also participating because I try to get involved to understand others’ thinking and what my tutor is saying... (Asuka)

7.2. Participation back home

The participants had a strong preference for and felt the importance of being interactive in classrooms ‘back home’ (the countries where the participants originally came from). Their lecturers in their country of origin valued, welcomed, and even encouraged their students to ask questions during the lecture.

I like speak out...I have the right raise my hand during the lecture if I have questions, because question is something I have to know to follow the lecture...it affected me a lot in getting good friends because I can get close to my lecturer and ask them many things after class...most of them [lecturers] are very positive... back in Korea...are very willing to accept comments or students participation. (Hyun)

In China, when the teacher raises a question, I’m the most talkative student. My lecturer would respond and give feedback. He actually encouraged and said ‘everyone, can you please raise your hand if you know the answer and please say something?’ (Qing)

On the other hand, the participants were also aware that the number of opportunities they had to interact in classrooms in universities back home was less than they had in Australia. This lower frequency of participation was perceived as being due to the culture of their institutions or classrooms and the size of the class (overcrowded classrooms, an exam-oriented culture influencing lecturers’ pedagogical style, and lecture as the only means for a lesson to be delivered).

The classroom over there [back home] definitely smaller and overcrowded because more than 30 students...it’s more like you have to absorb information and all your exams are in terms of competition. And they [schools] have weekly exam...so when finish school, you go for tuition (Honsiah).

In Korea, the atmosphere is not like here...university X (Australia) has tutorial time...so they encourage students to speak out a lot but in Korea, we usually have only lecture there’re many students just sit and listen to lecture...so the atmosphere is not that good to speak out... (Hyun).

Japanese university classes, students are very silent...because teacher doesn’t require us to discuss. Some teachers...doesn’t want the students to speak up maybe because they feel like they are interrupted, they think it’s their time to speak, no time for students (Asuka)
7.3. Participation in Australia as contextually dependent

According to these participants, tutors’ attitudes, the topics for tutorial discussion, and tutors’ pedagogical practices do, to a great extent, influence their participation in tutorials.

Most participants expressed a strong preference towards participating in tutorials in which the tutors create a comfortable and safe learning atmosphere, are enthusiastic about teaching the subject, and use body language that shows acceptance of students’ opinions.

I feel comfortable when lecturer...is always cheerful, motivate us, [tell] interesting story and joke...that makes us the whole class very comfortable and fun (Asuka)

If the tutors enjoy the lecture, the students are more likely to enjoy the lecture more...but if you feel boring, look serious, then the students will feel asleep (Qing)

I really like when the tutor nods his head and says something like “uhh, that’s good” or “uhh, I see”. It was the small words that made me feel much better and comfortable in participating (Hyun)

Furthermore, they are also eager to participate in tutorial discussions when tutors are able to arouse students’ interest and connect what is taught in class to students’ prior knowledge or experiences.

With a teacher who does a very good job at teaching sometimes an uninteresting topic becomes interesting...you talk free...it makes you look at it in a different way. Then you’ll be interested in it and find more information about it (Honsiah)

She tried to connect the subject to Japanese culture...we were talking about indigenous people language and they have different concept...for example, in both English and Aboriginal language, she asked me whether Japanese and English has this kind difference and give example...so I talked about it...so she helped me to participate in discussion (Asuka)

In further conversations with the researcher, however, the participants reported with disappointment that there were other tutorials in which they could not participate because the lecturers or tutors:

...were not open to me...when I talk...they just take it for nothing. Sometimes they just ‘ok’ and then skip it...I raised my hands a lot and tried to answer the questions out loud but they made other Aussie students answer and after few times I was treated like this, I will not participate. (Hyun)

[give] the impression that he’s not bothered with whatever problems you have...Sometimes looks down on you if you ask questions...you feel like ‘are you dumb?’ even though that person doesn’t say out to you, and the person ignore your question... (Honsiah)

...doesn’t listen to students...To explain something, I need...long sentence, lot of words, I want my tutors to be patient, but...changed the tutorial because the tutor wasn’t listening, not patient...and always interrupts me talking and tell me what he wants to tell without listening to me (Asuka)

Both Qing and Asuka also reported that the topics that their tutors used as the basis for discussion in tutorials also inhibit their participation in class.

Sometimes the topic is like the relationship between Middle East and Australia...because I have no knowledge background about both countries, so if you raise this topic, I feel nothing to say and I feel boring sitting there. And she did not even invite us to talk about anything about the relationship between Middle East and China...my own experiences (Qing)

The subject is about indigenous Australians...I didn’t have any previous knowledge about it (Asuka)

8. Discussing NESB ISAs’ voices

8.1. Revisiting NESB ISAs’ participation

All participants seem to refute the deficit view of NESB ISAs as students who struggle with participating in class, do not share the notion that talking is connected to thinking, and who, as Ballard and Clanchy (1997) described, will be inevitably appalled by an interactive classroom atmosphere. They tend to perceive participation as making an oral contribution to a deepening their soul and knowledge (Asuka and Qing), but also to personal and social development such as gaining recognition in class and establishing social networks. It is clear that participation in a form of ‘talking’ seems to be perceived by NESB ISAs as both enjoyable and educationally beneficial. Thus, the deficit view of NESB ISAs as not valuing participation is, to a significant extent, refuted.

The participants also perceive listening, reading, and researching as other forms of active participation. By doing these, a person is mentally engaging with or carefully processing the ideas that they are being exposed to, and then “mixing them with...
All participants appear to contest the description of NESB ISAs as being ‘passive learners’ in Western university tutorials, due to their cultural predispositions. To recap, the cultural explanation tends to depict these students as having fixed and unchanging characteristics which clearly distinguish them from Western students. It also suggests a culturally imperialistic way of considering NESB ISAs’ tutorial participation that creates the binary opposition of ‘us’ (Western culture = active) and ‘them’ (Asian culture = passive). In fact, the data indicate that both teachers and students in some of the participants’ countries valued and enjoyed being active or asking questions in class as a valid form of participation, but not necessarily as always the best or most effective form of participation. Therefore, there may be a need to perceive infrequent classroom participation as something that also exists in other non-Asian settings rather than as an ‘Asian thing’. As evidenced by some of the participants, there were some English-speaking local (native English-speaking Australian) students who were less participative and none of them attributed these characteristics to their culture.

8.2. “No, it’s not in my culture”

All participants appear to contest the description of NESB ISAs as being ‘passive learners’ in Western university tutorials, due to their cultural predispositions. To recap, the cultural explanation tends to depict these students as having fixed and unchanging characteristics which clearly distinguish them from Western students. It also suggests a culturally imperialistic way of considering NESB ISAs’ tutorial participation that creates the binary opposition of ‘us’ (Western culture = active) and ‘them’ (Asian culture = passive). In fact, the data indicate that both teachers and students in some of the participants’ countries valued and enjoyed being active or asking questions in class as a valid form of participation, but not necessarily as always the best or most effective form of participation. Therefore, there may be a need to perceive infrequent classroom participation as something that also exists in other non-Asian settings rather than as an ‘Asian thing’. As evidenced by some of the participants, there were some English-speaking local (native English-speaking Australian) students who were less participative and none of them attributed these characteristics to their culture.

...in my class half of Aussies are quiet... either they are not ready for that week topic... or don’t know what is going on (Honsiah)

...some Australian people don’t speak... but I think they are just thinking (Asuka)

Therefore, it can be seen that the cultural explanation of students’ participation or less classroom participation is indeed problematic as it ignores the fact that difference not only occurs between, but also within culture (Louie, 2005, p. 24, italics in the original) and that similarity not only occurs within, but also between cultures. Teachers and researchers, regardless of which backgrounds they come from, may need to recognise the diversity in their own culture. They may also need to be aware of the problems in using ‘culture’ as the sole criterion to explain different patterns of participation of students who come from different backgrounds or appear to behave differently from the ones who share the same backgrounds as the teachers and researchers.

The data also indicate the limitation of the culturally based explanation in providing a clear picture of the learners (Kumaravadivelu, 2003) as it overlooks other important contextual factors affecting their participation such as the contextual factors. None of the participants reported that their less frequent interaction in class back home was because they perceived teachers as the embodiment of knowledge from whom they should learn submissively. Nor did they care much about the evaluative eyes of the significant others. The overcrowded classroom, the “atmosphere” (Hyun) and the size of the classroom, as reported, tend to be less conducive to interaction. Therefore, from these data, the physical contextual factors in teaching and learning situations are clearly more significant than the cultural features of learners, in the learners’ eyes.

Furthermore, the culture of the institutions in the participants’ home countries (exam-oriented) and the small culture established by their classroom teachers tend to diminish the possible frequency of interaction in class. Honsiah commented that because the institutions in Brunei required students to sit for an exam every week, teachers tended to focus more on passing on knowledge that their students needed to know for the exams. This might well have caused the teacher to prioritise passing exams rather than interaction. Thus, infrequent interaction in class can be construed as ‘experienced seniors’ who are helping ‘inexperienced juniors’ with learning strategies to pass exams rather than ‘authoritative teachers’ from whom students should imbibe knowledge submissively. Despite the constraints imposed by exam-oriented institutions, teachers still allowed, valued, and encouraged interaction and discussion in class. This suggests the value of this kind of learning is highly recognised, by teachers, if not by institutions.

Thirdly, the data also gave no indication of students’ lower participation in class back home as being shaped by the teaching of Confucianism. The participants from Korea, Japan, and China (often referred to as the ‘Confucian Heritage Countries’) showed a strong preference for participating in class which seems to contradict with the teaching of Confucianism. One of the participants (Hyun) revealed that her active participation in class had provided her with an opportunity to get close to the significant others (friends and lecturers) in order to gain knowledge. Therefore, as argued by Ryan and Louie (2005) and Shi (2006), teachers in Western countries should not treat 2000 years old philosophy as highly significant for contemporary settings.

This argument, to a certain extent, also tends to fall into the trap of homogenising Asian students. It implies that Asian students all once had a particular characteristic (passive/submissive due to the perception of teacher as the embodiment of knowledge) in the past, but they are different (active) in contemporary classrooms. It seems to overlook that there is something from the past that still remains similar in contemporary classrooms. This can be seen in the commonality that all participants share despite of their age difference. These participants had completed the majority of their studies back home. However, what distinguished them was that Honsiah and Qing were mature-age students and Hyun and Asuka were young adults (early 20s). From their responses about their participation back home, they showed similarity in their preference for an interactive classroom and most importantly in the context or culture of the institutions (exam-oriented,
overcrowded class or large size class—lecture, but no tutorial) which had reduced but NOT eliminated the frequency of interaction in class.

Therefore, any perspective that looks at culture, Confucianism, and time (past or contemporary) as a way of understanding NESB ISAs’ participation back home may be problematic or simply inaccurate. When encountering NESB ISAs who participate infrequently in tutorials, recognising the cultural roots of their reluctance to participate (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997), modelling the so-called ‘locally appropriate’ behaviour, or shifting NESB ISAs’ attitudes towards talkativeness (Jones, 1997) are also unlikely to encourage these students to participate actively in university classrooms. Rather, having awareness of the context and the culture of NESB ISAs’ previous educational institutions (not necessarily from a deficit point of view) and creating a respectful environment or ‘a space’ for all students to be audible would be better alternative suggestions.

In light of the above discussion, rather than perceiving NESB ISAs who may appear to interact infrequently in tutorials as having reluctance to participate, I tend to perceive their infrequent participation as making the decision not to participate. As seen from the above discussion, while they recognise other forms of participation which they find very useful in enhancing their learning, NESB ISAs do enjoy participating in tutorials.

8.3. Participation as contextually shaped

The data suggest that the personality, teaching styles, and attitudes of some tutors which the participants interpret as disrespectful and condescending resulted in a decision to withdraw from participation. This is borne out by the fact that although these participants study in the same institution and faculty, their reported participation varies from one tutorial to another. There are tutorials in which they feel comfortable to participate because the tutors are enthusiastic, motivating, and accepting. There are also some tutorials in which the participants exhibit stereotypical ‘passive behaviour’. When students perceive tutors as ignoring them or showing preference towards English-speaking Australian students; or when they send out a non-verbal message that the students are unintelligent; or when they teach in an authoritarian way, NESB ISAs interpret this as disrespectful and tend to choose to withdraw. Therefore, it can be argued that NESB ISAs who appear to be less participative in one tutorial may not necessarily behave in the same way in other tutorials. If they appear to be less participative, tutors may need to critically question and reflect on their own attitudes. It is too easy to attribute it to students’ cultures and this can be seen as a ploy “to avoid examining their own attitudes and practices” (Chalmers & Volet, 1997, p. 96). Since a classroom is the small culture co-constructed by teachers and their students, overtly impatient behaviour and some non-verbal behaviours that are easily shown by teachers that may easily be interpreted as disrespectful and condescending by NESB ISAs can implicitly ‘illegitimise’ them as a member of that small culture and construct them as ‘nobody’ (Kettle, 2005) despite their willingness to be ‘somebody’ (Kettle, 2005) or ‘audible’ (Kettle, 2005) in tutorials.

All participants supported Bigg’s (1999) contextual approach of understanding NESB ISAs’ difficulty in participating in tutorials, which states that this difficulty lies in the teaching rather than the students. They show an appreciation and eagerness to participate when their tutors invite them to share their experiences and then use these experiences to explain the topics that may be unfamiliar to them. In contrast, tutors who use ‘localised’ (in this case a predominance of ‘Australian’) topics do not make it easy for non-local students to connect their previous experiences or knowledge to the topics under discussion. Assuming that ‘they should know it’ tends to cause these students to have ‘nothing to say’ (Qing). In light of this, it is important to note that NESB ISAs do not come to tutorials with no knowledge. They bring their socio-cultural knowledge and all the experiences they have gained back home to the tutorials in Australia. Therefore, their unfamiliarity with the specific local topics and the lack of connection being made between these students’ socio-cultural knowledge and the unfamiliar topics are likely to cause NESB ISAs to be less interactive in class. As one participant pointed out, the topic that tutors use as a basis for classroom discussion is not as significant as the tutors’ ability to teach. If a topic is boring, but the tutors are able to teach in a way that is accessible to students, “uninteresting topics becomes interesting” (Honsiah) which may encourage students to participate eagerly in tutorials.

Due to time constraints, this study investigated a small number of undergraduate NESB ISAs from one particular faculty and university in Australia. Therefore, their views are not necessarily the views of other students from the same nationalities and the implications of the study cannot be generalised beyond the immediate context of this research. In addition, the study was not able to investigate NESB ISAs’ experiences of participation in other faculties or in postgraduate classes and English-speaking local or international students’ experiences of tutorial participation. Future research in these areas would be helpful.

9. Conclusion and implications

In light of the theme, literature, the data and its discussion, this section concludes the study by suggesting strategies that some university lecturers/tutors may want to consider in order for all students including NESB ISAs to be audible in tutorials, i.e. developing an awareness of performing the role(s) of a critical reflective tertiary practitioner in university tutorials.

9.1. Challenge ‘common’ assumptions about participation and NESB ISAs

It may be important to critically challenge ‘talking’ as the only form of active participation and its implicit use to label NESB ISAs, who may under circumstances participate much less than English-speaking students, as ‘passive learners’.

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Talking is not necessarily the only form of participation and silence does not necessarily mean being mentally disengaged. As the students interviewed for this study confirm listening, reading, and researching are also valid and effective forms of participation.

Rather than blaming NESB ISAs’ lack of participation in tutorials on their cultures and labelling them as passive learners or ‘different’, some lecturers may need to be aware of the implications of the assumptions and beliefs behind behaviours or actions that can construct these students as ‘the other’. Students coming from different countries and cultures may appear to be relatively different from local students. However, this difference should not be perceived as universal and reified, and therefore, as a deficiency that needs a remedy. The actions of blaming NESB ISAs’ cultures tend to imply the aforementioned perception. In response to this, lecturers/tutors may need to challenge this perception that tends to overlook the existence of similarities, ambiguities, and contradictions between and within cultures. As this study has confirmed, NESB ISAs can and do enjoy participating in an interactive tutorial and share similar perceptions of what is commonly thought of as participation by lecturers/tutors working in Western English-speaking countries. Their experiences and observations have also partly confirmed that there are local students who may not be as interactive as other local students.

In addition, these perceptions do not necessarily mean that NESB ISAs/local students have been Westernised/Asianised, are following Western/Asian trend, and no longer displaying characteristics in past and contemporary Asian/Western countries. Participating in interactive classrooms seems to be valued, welcomed and enjoyed by all students regardless of their backgrounds, which generation they belong to, and which era they are in. Under participation in tutorials can be found in many students from all backgrounds. Therefore, it seems to be important for lecturers/tutors to recognise that there is considerable diversity regarding participation amongst all students. It is important to be responsive to and supportive of a range of different ways of participating.

9.2. Critically reflect on the small culture

An ability to critically reflect on the small culture which lecturers/tutors co-construct with their students tends to be one of the skills that tertiary practitioners may need to continually develop. This is because teacher’s attitudes, pedagogical practices, and the kind of activities they habitually engage in have been shown to have positive or negative implications on students’ participation and how they perceive themselves. This study strongly suggests that it is not that NESB ISAs are reluctant to participate, but they decide not to participate in some tutorials due to their contextual or small-cultural factors which implicitly or explicitly construct these students as the ‘nobody’. Therefore, it is important for universities to support their lecturers and tutors in such a way that they are able to self-examine their own attitudes and practices and recognise the danger of creating a binary opposition of ‘us’ (tutors and local students) and ‘them’ (NESB ISAs) (Kumaravadivelu, 2003) in one’s verbal and non-verbal behaviour and pedagogical practices.

9.3. Listen to ‘voices’

Some lecturers/tutors may need to train themselves to have “listening intellects” to listen to the voices of students, other practitioners, and cultural and political workers (Pennycook, 1994, p. 305). For some practitioners, listening to the comments made by these people about their teaching can be a threat to their self-esteem as university teachers. However, learning to become a good practitioner is an endless journey. To learn to be a good practitioner, one can simply listen to and use the voices of other teachers, cultural and political workers, and most importantly to one’s own students as a guide for critical self-reflection of one’s own practices and for creating good teaching practices for all.

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References


