Factors influencing classroom participation: a case study of Malaysian undergraduate students

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Abstract

Despite the importance often assigned to participation in classroom, it has been repeatedly reported that most students remain passive in class. This study aims to document influencing factors that shape undergraduate students’ participation in Malaysian classrooms. Interviews and observations were carried out. 85 students from two communication classes were observed over the period of two semesters (28 weeks). Most of the participants fell between the age of 18-19 years old (65.8%) and 66.7% of the participants were female while 33.3% were male. 25 students from the two classes were interviewed. The results strongly endorse that lecturer traits and classmate traits play significant roles in promoting student participation. Recommendations are offered to educators in formulating future teaching strategies that promote students’ participation in the context of higher learning.

Keywords: Classroom participation; influencing factors; undergraduate students.

1. Introduction

The benefits of participation have been researched quite extensively over the past years. Active classroom participation played an important role in the success of education and students’ personal development in the future (Tatar, 2005). Students, who are actively involved, reported higher satisfaction and higher persistence rates (Astin, 1999). Fassinger (1995) has observed that research on participation is “dominated by studies of children; less is known about the dynamics of classrooms containing adults or young adults” (p.25). Thus, there is a lacking in the literature that searched for evidence in university classrooms and from the perspective of students (young adults) themselves. Tatar (2005) commented that only few studies have investigated classroom participation from the perspective of students, or attempted to discover the reasons why some students don’t participate even when participation is encouraged. Exploring classroom participation from students’ perspective is important because it provides a firsthand account and insight into their feelings and perceptions. The students’ perceptions are their own realities in experiencing classroom participation.
There have been a variety of reasons identified in prior studies as having influences in encouraging or discouraging students’ participation. Factors specific to the students like age (Karp & Yoels, 1976; Howard, Short & Clark, 1996; Howard & Henney, 1998; Howard, James & Taylor 2002), gender (Auster & MacRone, 1994; Corneilius, Gray, & Constantinople, 1990; Crawford & MacLeod, 1990), students’ willingness to talk (Chan & McCroskey, 1987), course level (Frithsner, 2000), student preparation (Fassinger, 1995; Howard & Henney, 1998; Howard, James & Taylor., 2002; Tinto, 1997) and student emotions like confidence or fear (Fassinger, 1995; Howard & Henney, 1998; Howard et al., 2002; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1999) have been reported to influence their participation.

Pedagogical and education environmental factors like faculty authority (Auster & MacRone, 1994; Fassinger, 1995; Howard & Baird, 2000), class size (Constantinople, Corneilius, & Gray, 1988; Fassinger, 1995; Howard et al., 1996; Howard et al., 2002) and classroom instructor communication variables (Fassinger, 2000; Karp & Yoels, 1975) have also proven to be influential.

Studies on classroom participation in Malaysia have been scant. Liew (2009) investigated factors affecting second language learners’ classroom participation. The study focuses mainly on the second language learning. Zainal Abidin (2007) carried out an investigation into Malaysian students’ oral classroom participation with the participants being 146 first year Engineering students. The study found five factors that influence students’ classroom participation: linguistic, pedagogical, cognitive, affective, and socio-cultural factors. These factors were inter-related. This study was limited due to a short duration of observation period (two weeks), a small number of interviewees and only two groups were observed.

2. Research questions

The purposes of the study are to explore the undergraduate students’ perceptions regarding classroom participation and discover factors affecting their participation through the following research questions:
1. What are the common factors that encourage students’ classroom participation?
2. What are the common factors that discourage students’ classroom participation?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The study was conducted at a medium-sized private university in Kuala Lumpur. The participants were undergraduate students pursuing communication courses. The courses were selected because they required a high level of student participation and focused more on oral communication activities rather than writing skills. Two intact classes of 84 students were selected to provide a heterogeneous population regarding age, gender, background, and race. The participants were all Malaysian students with similar education backgrounds and expressed agreement to take part in the study.

3.2 Data Collection

During the first stage of the study, in-depth interviews were carried out with open-ended questions and as few prompts as possible to elicit rich descriptions of experiences. 25 participants, 10 male and 15 female were selected from the two classes. The participants for the interview were carefully selected using maximum variation sampling. The purpose of using this kind of sampling was to document unique or diverse variations in order to identify important communication patterns that cut across variations. They were asked about their personal experiences in classroom participation and the ways they participate in class. For example, participants were asked ‘How would you describe classroom participation?’ and ‘Are there times that you participate more or less in class? Why?’ Each interview lasted for approximately 20 minutes.

In the second stage, the observations were conducted during the third through tenth week of a fourteen-week semester. Observations were carried out by observing all potentially relevant occurrences of participation behaviours of students. The non-participant observation was appropriate because the observer remained inconspicuous so that the behaviour of the participants was not affected. Field-note-taking and video tape recordings were also allowed during the observations in the two classes. 120 minutes from each session was recorded on video.
3.3 Data Analysis

Data from the interviews were transcribed verbatim and data from the observation were coded. Recurring patterns and themes of patterns of participation exhibited by the students in the classroom activities were identified through reading and re-reading the data and listening to and watching the taped sessions. The final categories were derived from the identification of similar themes from multiple participants. The emerging patterns were revealed and they were basically categories of behaviour that reflect students’ perception of what makes them participate more or less in class.

4. Results
4.1 Factors that encourage students’ participation

Students cited four most influential factors that encouraged them to participate. Ranked most influential were positive lecturer traits. Positive classmate traits ranked second, engaging class content ranked third and conducive physical settings ranked last. Positive lecturer traits ranked highest in the list of most frequent factors mentioned as having an influence on students’ participation. 23 out of 25 participants mentioned lecturer traits as the most influential factor in determining their level of participation in class. Students reported that supportive lecturers who make it clear to the students that they welcome active participation and do not mind mistakes are seen as a positive influence for the students to participate in class as a student explained, “Yeah when the lecturer always asks her students..us, to give out our opinions and our answers, even though our answers are wrong, she said that it’s ok as long as we try, it would be good enough, so I think she really encourages her students to talk in class” (Interviewee 1).

Lecturers who are understanding make the students feel comfortable enough to share their answers or thoughts since they do not need to fear being scolded for answering wrongly. This is clear in the following remarks which a student made, “When the lecturer is nice… I participate more.. when the lecturer does not scold or condemn… I am not scared to volunteer and answer questions. I like understanding lecturers and lecturers who can accept my opinions. I explain more when I think my lecturer is listening to me!” (Interviewee 13).

Lecturers with sense of humour make learning and participating fun for the students. The students expressed their liking for lecturers who can crack jokes and can relate to them. They said: “If the lecturer can relate to us and can think like how young people like us think, you know….like she is one of us and can crack jokes..like telling funny stories, then we would be more active in class.” (Interviewee 4) and “I think Ms. Hazlin’s class is very enjoyable and because her teaching is more understandable and she makes explanation really, like, detailed-easy to understand and she is humorous…her jokes are entertaining…make us laugh and that encourages students… I like lecturers who crack jokes because it makes learning fun and easy to absorb (laughs)” (Interviewee 6).

Other traits exhibited by lecturers like being open-minded, approachable, nice, friendly, and flexible in allowing students to challenge each other’s opinion and accept a different point of view in class were seen as motivating factors by students.

Positive classmate traits ranked second in the list of most frequent factors mentioned as influencing students’ participation. 10 out of 25 participants mentioned supportive and familiar classmates as the second most influential factor in determining their level of participation in class. For example, two students described the effects of having supportive classmates as: “When I have supportive classmates…they won’t laugh at my answers…” (Interviewee 18) and “I participate more when I feel that …. my classmates will listen to what I have to say. I don’t want people to laugh at my answer” (Interviewee 22).

Having classmates who they know well and have the traits of being supportive influences students positively and propels them to be more active in class. They felt that they did not need to fear negative evaluation from their classmates. A good rapport that they had with their classmates created a relaxed atmosphere that helped them lose their inhibition about being active in class. A student described this as: “I am active in class so I appreciate having supportive classmates…classmates who are not scared of trying …or not scared to make mistakes…I feel that trying to participate will help students to think better…” (Interviewee 17).

Engaging class content ranked third in the list of most frequent factors mentioned as influencing students’ participation. 7 out of 25 participants mentioned interesting topics and fun activities as the third most influential factor in determining their level of participation in class. For instance, a student explained: “activities…like role-plays…In one role-play, we were asked to pretend that we were reporters at a press release. We had so much fun.
All of us participated. We asked lots of questions. I like that kind of a class. Fun activities make students feel excited about participating!” (Interviewee 3). Students also mentioned they participated more when they were familiar with the topics and the topics were controversial.

Physical settings ranked fourth in the list of most frequent factors mentioned as influencing students’ participation. 4 out of 25 participants mentioned smaller group of students in class and comfortable classrooms have positive effects on their participation. The students mentioned that smaller classes made them feel more comfortable to speak up. A student said: “If the class is small, I feel relaxed coz everyone will listen when I share my ideas. I don’t have to speak loudly…I like that…I feel accepted! (laughs)...more like “appreciated” (Interviewee 11). Similarly, another student added: “I speak more when I am in a small class...people are just friendlier when it is just a small group. I also get to interact more with my lecturer and other friends in class...so the atmosphere is not intimidating!” (Interviewee 25). When asked to define a small class, they answered that a small class was when the class had 30 students or less.

Being in a comfortable classroom also helped the students to feel relaxed and more participative. This is explained by one student: “If the class is a happy class…I mean … the room is comfortable...chair is not hard, the air-conditioner is working, the room is spacious, everyone is friendly, then...I talk more!” (Interviewee 1). The students expressed that they felt more comfortable in a small and comfortable class because they were able to interact more with their lecturer and classmates, thus making participation less daunting.

From the observation, students demonstrated more inclination to participate when the lecturers called them by name, ask probing questions, and engage in positive nonverbal behaviours such as smiling and nodding to acknowledge their answers. Classmates’ encouragement and non-verbal responses like cheering or clapping hands were observed to be encouraging the reticent students to attempt answering questions or take part in class activities.

4.2 Factors that discouraged students from participating

The investigation into the factors that inhibit students’ participation help to provide insight into their perception of what is actually keeping them inactive or quiet in class. The findings revealed that there were five major factors that induced reticence among the students. Negative classmate traits ranked highest in the list of most frequent factors mentioned as discouraging students’ participation. 14 out of 25 students reported that the ways some students behave in class affect the participation of other students. Many of the students interviewed expressed their displeasure regarding having classmates who do not know when to keep quiet. For instance, a student elaborated: “And then, certain students make lots of noise coz they are not focusing...too many students and the noise make it difficult for me to concentrate!” (Interviewee 3). They found the noise made by their classmates disturbing and hampering their concentration to the extent that it made contributing to the class discussion difficult for them. Other classmates’ traits that deter participation reported by students were creating disturbances, teasing, monopolizing and not being cooperative or patient.

Negative lecturer traits ranked second in the list of most frequent factors mentioned as discouraging students’ participation. 11 out of 25 students mentioned that negative lecturer traits like having poor teaching skills, being impatient and unapproachable deter students from participating. A student said: “When the lecturer is, you know, keep teaching without looking at us or ask us anything, just teach, so, I get bored (laughs), you know, I don’t feel like participating in that class” (Interviewee 7). Another student commented “Or when my lecturer condemns, or shows that he does not like my answer non-verbally...you know...making negative gestures!” (Interviewee 14). These students felt that lecturers who were not approachable or showed hostility made them less participative.

Negative student traits ranked third in the list of most frequent factors mentioned as discouraging students’ participation. 10 out of 25 students said that their own limitation serves as a hindrance to their class participation. The students felt that they could not focus on the class when they have personal problems, in a bad mood and even feeling tired or sleepy. One of the students explained: “When my mood is not OK...I won’t talk much in class. Or when I have a personal problem” (Interviewee 10). Some of the students expressed said they were afraid of making mistakes. For instance, two of them explained: “So sometimes I don’t participate when I am scared that I would make grammatical errors. I can’t be spontaneously. I feel that I am slow when I speak.” (Interviewee 3) and “If I have to speak in English, I am scared that my pronunciation is wrong. I am afraid that others can’t understand me” (Interviewee 9). These students were concerned and wanted to avoid making mistakes as they did not want to feel embarrassed when speaking in class.

Non-conducive physical settings ranked fourth in the list of most frequent factors mentioned as discouraging students’ participation. Two students reported, “If the class doesn’t have the air conditioning—I talk less.”
(Interview 1) and “The size of the class is a bit small, all the tables are placed too near...a bit cramped...So, students who come late must sit at the back. Rather far from the front. It becomes difficult to hear and see what’s going on in front. So, can’t participate!” (Interviewee 3). The students found the physical layout of the classroom like a cramped class and a large number of students in class as influential in discouraging them from participating.

Uninteresting and difficult class content was the fifth most mentioned factor hindering class participation. The students faced difficulties in understanding class content that was difficult and they lost focus when it was uninteresting. For example, a student said: “I don’t feel like participating when ..... it is a difficult topic. When the topic is difficult, I will listen and I will keep quiet. I don’t know what to say coz I am still trying to understand!” (Interviewee 9)

Results suggest that classmates and lecturers play pivotal roles in creating a classroom climate for students to feel encouraged or discouraged to participate. Having classmates and lecturers with negative traits, personal problems, non-conducive physical setting, non-interesting or difficult topics and fear of making mistakes were the factors identified as a damper to students’ participation.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The study discovered that lecturer traits were the most influential factor in encouraging participation among students. This finding confirms the results of studies done by Fassinger (2000) and Karp and Yoels (1975). They also found that classroom instructor communication variables play an important role in shaping classroom interaction. Traits mentioned by students in this study like being encouraging, understanding, approachable are consistent with several studies which also found that students participate more when instructors engage in behaviours that are confirming, encouraging, and supportive (Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2004; Fassinger, 1995, 2000).

In addition, students were observed to be more inclined to participate when the lecturers called them by name, ask probing questions, and engage in positive nonverbal behaviours such as smiling and nodding to acknowledge their answers. This finding is consistent with studies carried out by Auster & MacRone (1994) and Crombie, Pyke, Silverthorn, Jones, & Piccinin (2003). A trait like being open-minded has also been cited by students and this is similar to the finding from a study by Cayanus & Martin (2004). Lecturers who are open-minded have a motivating effect for students to be participative.

While positive lecturers’ traits encourage participation, negative traits like having poor teaching skills and being unapproachable discourage participation. This finding supports the study done by Fawzia (2002) who found that pedagogical factors like the course, topic, lecturer and teaching style could influence students’ participation. Signs of impatience by lecturers or classmates were reported to be discouraging some students from participating. When the lecturer or classmates don’t want to wait for their answers, these students just stop talking. Tobin and Capie (1982) who did a research on teacher questioning found that “teacher wait time” or the amount of time a teacher waits before she or he answers her or his own question, was positively correlated with student outcome measures. Fritschner (2000) found that students rarely asked questions or made comments to instructors who waited “no more than a few seconds” (p.356). Hence, not just teacher wait time but also classmate wait time are important variables in influencing students’ attempt to participate by answering questions asked in class.

Negative students’ traits which refers to students’ own limitation was found to deter their class participation. Inability to focus and fear of making mistakes were reported to be discouraging students’ participation. Studies carried out by Fassinger (1995) and Gomez, Arai & Lowe (1995) found similar traits; lack of confidence, lack of preparation, fear of appearing unintelligent to their classmates or instructors, and feeling intimidated make students become less inclined to participate.

Educators need to make all the students in the class aware that their behaviours affect other students’ behaviours. Findings have shown that classmates’ traits are highly influential in encouraging or discouraging classroom participation. Students must take responsibility to be supportive of others so others can be supportive of them. This reciprocal relationship needs to be stressed if students were to reap benefits from active class participation.

Educators play a pivotal role in encouraging participation by accepting all contributions made in class as important. Providing students with strategies to overcome their fear of speaking in class, and making constant effort to relate the topics to the students’ life make students feel more involved. By striving to provide a more supportive, non-threatening and open learning environment, educators would make students feel comfortable in letting their voices be heard.
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