

# Overcoming Asian stereotypes: Opportunities for enhancing student participation in Chinese ELT classes

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## ABSTRACT

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Engaging Asian students in ELT classrooms is often cited as a special challenge. This paper looks at the myths of the Asian learner and some of the reasons given for their lack of participation. Cultural explanations have frequently been offered, with the convenient notion of Confucianism being an excuse for many of the behaviours teachers consider passive. Evidence from classroom observations is offered to argue that students really want to be engaged and that ELT professionals need to consider a variety of other elements before they label their students as reticent.

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## Introduction

The first time I taught English in China, I took a lot of baggage along with me. And I do not mean the teaching resources in my suitcase; I had read a lot about diverse learning styles, how the Chinese belonged to a wider group of Asian learners influenced by their Confucian background. There is a wealth of literature in the field, much of it containing the key words shy, reticent or passive. From this, teachers often assume that these students are not engaged.

When I returned to China a year later, I was ready for the large classes and the less exuberant atmosphere; I had strategies in place for group work and was more prepared to take risks with different activities. Being more receptive to class dynamics and individual personalities, I began to question the stereotypes. These are summarised by Tani (2005) under the following headings:

- The effect of Asian culture
- The relationship between the student and the teacher in Asia
- The influence of language skills abilities, and related issues.

Tani (2005, p. 5) discusses the myth of the Asian learner and comments that "The insights from the literature ... gave me a better appreciation of the complexity surrounding a relatively simple behaviour observed in class (silence!)." Yet the profile of students that emerges from the discussion is not the one many of us have been using to explain or justify classroom behaviours.

The relevance of culture to student participation is specifically disputed by Kumaravadivelu (2007) who cites Amy Tsui's report into student reticence; a range of contributing factors are cited, and culture is *not* included in the list. In addition, Kumaravadivelu (2007, p. 58) cites research which shows that "English-speaking North American students do not actively participate in the interactive activities of their foreign language classes."

This categorization of students is an issue of increasing relevance to the ELT industry generally. Asian students are part of a growing number of learners accessing programs in countries where English is the *Lingua Franca* (be it as the L1 or L2). Zimmerman (1999) gives an Australian perspective: the country provides English language education to approximately 65,000 international students per year. International export education as an industry is worth \$3.3 billion to Australia annually; the ELICOS sector accounts for between \$660–\$740 million of these earnings. Zimmerman (2007) also provides a projection of the growth in higher education demand, from 97 million places in 2000 to 263 million in 2025 and notes that 60% of this demand will come from Asia (which is broadly defined as China and India).

For these reasons, it is crucial that teachers get it right and that might mean we have to reappraise our view of the Asian ELT learner. I would contest the notion that Asian students are disengaged or uninterested when they are in the classroom. I have observed their eagerness, hunger to master the language, and frustration at the system that, in large classes, denies them the opportunities they need to demonstrate their proficiency. It is time to discard the self-perpetuating myth of Asian learners and work with them, within the constraints of the elements which shape them, to maximise their ELT experience. The observations which follow are taken from my experience when teaching in China but the lessons for teachers apply to any Asian ELT setting.

### **Students want to be noticed**

In a class of more than 60 students, how can any individual make themselves noticed? Each lesson is 45 minutes long. Do the sums; that is 45 seconds per student assuming they get equal time. But they do not, because there are admin duties, presenting the grammar point or setting the context for a lesson.

The students have anticipated the arrival of the “foreign teacher”; there is a mixture of apprehension and excitement. Over the weeks we spend together, they want to get as many speaking and listening opportunities, to redress the imbalance from classes in earlier years, which were predominately grammar, reading and writing. The keen students are desperate to maximise these opportunities, inside and even outside of class. They want to be noticed, to stand out from the class as a whole.

How they develop these strategies is commendable, especially when many of them are only-children and have not had to compete for any attention within the family. In my case, it started with a phone call to my room before I had even met the class. The student was doing the IELTS test the coming weekend and wanted to talk over some issues. That led to a request to practice some interview topics. Then there are the pieces of paper you get in the first few days, with phone numbers or e-mail addresses on them. Sometimes there is a note as well: “Could you please call me whenever you want. I really hope and believe that I can help you with your teaching and living here.” Or simply an orange for the teacher from the student’s home province.

By the end of the first week, I had shared many lunches and had an invitation

for the weekend. I know it could be seen as opportunistic on the students' part, but there is also a genuine offer of friendship. And you have to admire their initiative. Think back to being a 20-year-old and imagine phoning a stranger in a second language. Also, especially when there is only one foreign teacher, the interaction is very welcome. It can be dull continually going out on your own, and the ones who make the offer are usually those with better English skills.

I realise I am not speaking about the whole class. There are those who consider the foreign teacher totally irrelevant to their life at college, those whose spoken English is so poor that they try to avoid any contact with us, and others who like to sit or sleep unnoticed at the back of the class. Getting them to engage is as much as a challenge as it is to find enough time and opportunity for the keen ones to demonstrate their ability. But the majority of students really want to be involved and participate, even if they do not make that extra effort as described above.

## **Important opportunities for students**

### *Journal writing*

One way to get to know them as individuals is to introduce a journal. I ask them to write every day for the first week, then several times a week or when there is a special event to describe, or a concern they have. These are collected after the first week, about 10 a day, until each one has been read. It is amazing what you can learn, what they will share with you. Yes, it can be a bit tedious reading many times about the same birthday party or college event, and the weaker students will copy an article from *21st Century* or something else they have read. But at least they are using English and developing a habit over the number of weeks you are together. In your responses you can reach out to them, comment on their successes or fears, in a way that is impossible in the classroom. I recall a student being amazed that I actually wrote anything; they had expected the journals to be collected and checked as a duty without any personal involvement.

Here is an entry that shows what we mean to some of them.

What a fantastic day it is! Gentle sunshine and breeze, lovely flowers along the road. Happy girls and boys talking and walking to their classroom with their books under their arms. And I am one of them. We all feel so excited because we'll have a new foreign teacher today. ...

And another that quickly brings one down to earth:

Our foreign teacher started today. She is an old lady.

Another journal comment that grounded me in a different way: I was juggling the protocol of asking the class monitor for assistance and trying to get the lesson underway efficiently. Something quite different was happening among these two students.

Rebecca asked me for help with the multimedia facility. At first Stephen wanted to solve the problem, but the result was not immediate. When I looked over, I

realised Stephen had already adjusted the machine. But Rebecca was waiting to start the class, so I took over and the machine started to work. Rebecca said thanks to me. In fact the thing was solved by Stephen but he didn't get the teacher's praise. I felt sorry for him.

The same student shows insight into the very issue I have been considering:

Rebecca asked me how to play the DVD. I used English to express my thinking to her. I so desired to communicate more with Rebecca. Instead I didn't take any actions. In fact I had so many opportunities. Stephen and I both want Rebecca to ask us more questions and correct our mistakes. But I understand we should be more active if we want others to notice us.

### ***Being nominated to speak***

Being nominated is also considered important. In the first week, I realised I was asking questions without doing this, mainly because I had not learned all the names and was trying to move the lesson on quickly; the other reason was that eliciting in open class works well in a small group, and this technique was what I was used to. But I discovered they expect to be called on to answer questions. A student pointed this out, explaining it makes students "excited". I thought she meant *motivated*, but when I enquired further I realised she really meant *alert*. If a student knows they might be called upon at any time, they are going to be more focused and attentive. It also gives them a licence to speak in class without seeming to promote themselves, and accords them part of their 45 seconds.

### ***Being known as an individual***

Use of student names is considered polite, and part of basic teaching methodology. But how much do we get to know them as a person? Yes, the obvious response is "How realistic is this as an aim?" But consider this from the student's perspective. Here is another journal entry on this subject.

After class many classmates got together to discuss how many students our foreign teacher knows. At that time I think whether our foreign teacher knows me. Maybe the answer is NO. Because I feel shy to communicate with our foreign teacher. I don't know how to express my meaning and I am afraid to make mistakes. I hope I will correct it in the future.

After reading this, I made an effort with this student; it started with just a small comment on the breakfast bun she had brought to class. I took a minute to slide into the vacant seat beside her and we exchanged some small talk. It just means being less absorbed in our lesson or administration duties and more open to interpersonal opportunities.

## **Conclusion**

Tsui, in Graddol (2006), claims that Asian countries are redefining what constitutes their culture; I suggest this is happening on an individual level

too. Many Asian ELT students are savvy, global citizens ready to maximise the opportunities awaiting them in the 21st century. For this, they need positive and encouraging classroom experiences.

When we meet resistance in the classroom, it is easy to accord too much importance to the influence of culture, which stops us examining other factors. Although it might be an uncomfortable proposition, we need to look closer to home, both at the organisational or administrative level and also at the individual classroom level and teaching practices. Pierson (in Kumaravadivelu, 2007, p. 56) lists factors such as student workloads, curriculum decisions, the focus on examinations and overcrowded classrooms that are likely to inhibit students' responses. He also cites Liu's comments that we need to evaluate Asian students' classroom communication patterns in the light of topic relevance and students' familiarity with the material, their motivation, anxiety regarding risk-taking, speaking skills (including communicative competence) and the teacher's presentation (ibid.). It is time to assess these other influences on the perceived lack of enthusiasm and participation and develop strategies to enhance opportunities for Asian ELT learners. To put it another way, before we can rate our students' communicative competency, we need to judge our own competency in our ability to engage them.

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