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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores reasons why some students with English as a Second Language (ESL) feel less entitled to speak out in class than others, discussing ways in which teachers can widen the definition of participation. The first section explains how student background can affect participation. For students who are non-native English speakers and who come from various ethnic backgrounds, being female and/or coming from working class backgrounds can be a barrier to participation. Instructors can address difficulties students have in actively participating in the class by being aware of these students' dilemma, discussing the issue explicitly with students, explaining why participating in discussion is considered essential in the U.S. educational system, and giving specific examples of how and why students studying in U.S. schools should speak out. Instructors should consciously widen their definitions of class participation, because some students who do not speak much in class show their involvement in other ways (e.g., body language). Teachers can structure class time to allow everyone time to speak out, rather than asking open-ended questions so that the same few people speak out. Students can be asked to give short written responses to questions that can be read aloud or handed in. (Contains 32 references.) (SM)

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## Language, Culture, Class, Gender, and Class Participation

"Participation" is considered an essential element in almost any class, including ESL classes, in the United States and many other Western countries. "Good" students participate. By participation we mean, generally, that students speak in class: they are ready to answer questions, they ask questions, they make comments, they join in class discussions. Students who do not participate actively in these ways are often considered to be lazy, unprepared, passive, and/or uninvolved students, and are generally penalized when class grades are assigned. Many ESL instructors know that the matter is more complex, but may be unsure about what the true reasons are, and about what they as instructors can do to understand and assist students who do not participate actively in classes. In fact, there are many reasons that some students do not speak out in class. Some of these reasons are related to personal characteristics such as shyness. Other reasons have to do with classroom dynamics, such as certain students' dominating class discussions. Yet other reasons are cultural, as the systems of education in some societies do not encourage classroom participation as it is defined in the United States. But the reasons for lack of traditional "participation" which I believe are most frequent, and which I focus on here, can be summarized as follows: many students simply do not feel "entitled" to participate. It seems on the surface that all students are, in the classroom, equal, and have both the equal right and the equal responsibility to "participate" by speaking out. Yet many students, because of their backgrounds, do not feel entitled to participate in the same way. They are

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not -- or feel they are not -- from the ranks of the privileged, those who take for granted their inherent right to speak out, to be heard, and to have their contributions valued.

Here I explore reasons that some students feel less entitled to speak out than others. I also discuss some ways in which we as teachers can widen the definition of "participation." I mainly refer to and focus on ESL students in ESL classes, but much of what I say also applies to ESL students in non-ESL classes, as well as to many non-ESL students. In any case, in today's multicultural societies and heterogeneous classrooms, with many students and their families at various stages of immigration and integration into new cultures and a new language, the distinctions between non-native speakers and native speakers of English are blurred.

When I speak of a sense of entitlement that students do or do not have, I am really speaking about power. The essential point is that some students have, or perceive that they have, power, and some do not. Students with power are in some sense part of an elite, though their very membership in the elite may be unconsciously taken for granted. Many consequences flow from this point. As Auerbach (1993) puts it, "commonly accepted everyday classroom practices, far from being neutral and natural, have ideological origins and consequences for relations of power both inside and outside the classroom" (p. 29). I submit that the way educators define "participation" has both pedagogical and political implications for students, particularly for students who do not perceive themselves as being entitled, at least in the educational setting. Jaworski and Sachdev (1998) state that an "important factor related to levels of silence was the presence of a significant power differential between participants with greater silence normally being associated with participants in low power situations" (p. 275). If participation means speaking, and non-participation means silence, then instructors requiring participation are privileging those who already have power. Further complicating matters, even students who would seem to be part of the elite, because of some of their characteristics, may feel they are outsiders because of other characteristics. So, for example, a student who is from an elevated social class

background may still feel a lack of entitlement because she is female. And a female student's working-class background compounds her "societally low power situation," which increases her anxiety and conflict, "frequently leading to the state of being silenced" (Walkerdine, 1985, paraphrased in Jaworski and Sachdev, 1998, p. 275). What is important to look at is not just one characteristic, such as class or gender, but the ways in which these characteristics intersect and interact.

### Backgrounds Which May Affect Participation

Students in both ESL and non-ESL classes might be intimidated, and feel "unentitled," because their first language is not English and because they come from various national and ethnic backgrounds; they might be particularly intimidated and afraid to participate actively if they are female, and/or if they come from working-class backgrounds. For students who have more than one of these characteristics, the difficulties may be even more intense and painful. Of course not all members of these groups share the sense of intimidation that I outline. But it is worthwhile to keep in mind that many members of these groups are affected by their backgrounds as they attend classes in the educational systems of English-language-speaking areas, and that a particular way in which they are affected is in the area of "class participation." Let us look more closely at each of the four characteristics mentioned above, and the ways in which these characteristics might affect class participation as it is traditionally defined.

The first and perhaps most obvious reason for some students to be hesitant to speak out in class is that English, the medium of instruction in class, is not their first language. ESL or other non-native speakers of English feel that native speakers of English, and even other non-native speakers who seem more at ease with the language, have some special or hidden knowledge of the language that will allow them to function better in class than they do. Naturally these students feel insecure about their grasp of the language and about their ability to express themselves clearly in English, especially when put on the spot and when in

front of many people. They may be afraid to make mistakes, and/or afraid they will not be understood, and even afraid they will be made fun of. Although they understand intellectually that learning a new language takes time, and that people around them will know and acknowledge this, the students may still feel a visceral sense of embarrassment, even inferiority, even shame. Such students may hesitate to speak unless they are absolutely sure of the correct "answer," or they may feel it is safer not to speak out in class at all. They may be especially unlikely to venture an opinion, during the course of class discussion, because they are less sure of how varying ideas and concepts will be received than they may be about the reception of clearly factual, "objective" material. These fears apply even in an ESL class, where all of the other students are non-native speakers of English; students still fear that they will make mistakes and look foolish.

Second, since ESL students are generally from cultures other than the one in which they are now studying, whether they are international students or immigrant students or students who have grown up in a home where their parents were from non-mainstream cultures, they may feel that they do not "know the ropes" and therefore that it is safer to keep quiet rather than speak out in class. In addition, some of these students come from cultures in which the educational traditions are different, and require students to listen respectfully to the professor rather than speaking out; in fact, such speaking out may be seen as challenging the professor, or as immodestly assuming that one's own views are as worthy as those of the authority figure, the professor, and thus disrespectful of that professor. There are some excellent descriptions of these cultural differences and of ways to help students adjust to the different expectations in, for example, the United States (Christison, 1997; Cochran, 1992; Leki, 1992). Students who feel insecure about knowing the "correct" cultural behavior in U.S. classrooms may also feel some of the sense of inferiority and even shame described above.

Third, much recent research shows that female students of all ages are less likely than male students to speak out, especially when they are not absolutely sure of an answer

or of what they have to say. They are less comfortable speaking in front of large groups. They are more easily intimidated by their professors and their classmates, and more self-conscious about the possibility of making a mistake or embarrassing themselves (see, e.g., American Association of University Women, 1992; Orenstein, 1994; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Sandler, Silverberg, & Hall, 1996; Woyshner & Gelfond, 1998). Much of this behavior can, again, be attributed to a lack of feeling entitled to speak out, to have one's opinions welcomed and valued. Young female students may be all too used to seeing males' comments and ideas valued more highly than those of females. These issues have been addressed by many scholars of feminist pedagogy (e.g., Culley & Portuges, 1985; Gabriel & Smithson, 1990; Luke & Gore, 1992; Maher & Tetreault, 1994; McCracken & Appleby, 1992), including a few who apply feminist pedagogy to the ESL classroom (e.g., Benesch, 1998; McMahill, 1997; Schenke, 1996; Sunderland, 1994; Vandrick, 1998). although much of the research on gender and pedagogy has been done in Western settings, and the results may be somewhat mediated by differences in cultures, many of the findings may well be at least somewhat applicable in various countries and cultural settings.

Finally, students from working class backgrounds, particularly those whose parents did not attend college, are, like students from other cultures, likely to feel that they do not "know the system," and therefore feel insecure about their own participation in college life in general, and in classroom discussion in particular. They may be afraid that they are unaware of certain "secrets" taken for granted by other more privileged students, and that by saying the wrong thing, or saying it in the wrong way, they will reveal their ignorance and inadequacy, as they may perceive it (see, e.g., More Working Class Studies, 1996; Weis & Fine, 1993; Working-Class Studies, 1995). Jaworski and Sachdev state that "non-middle-class students face more conflict, anxiety and uncertainty in trying to conform to the school 'norm' than ... middle-class students" (p. 285). Again we see the themes of lack of entitlement and even a sense of shame. The topic of the effect of class background on students in the classroom has been particularly explored by critical pedagogues (e.g., Apple,

1996) and by some scholars investigating the effects of class in the basic writing and composition classrooms (e.g., Bloom, 1996; Tate, McMillan, & Woodworth, 1997). The topic has seldom been addressed directly in ESL scholarship (see Bean, 1996, for a brief discussion of the importance of understanding students' class background, and Vandrick, 1995, for a discussion of ESL students from privileged class backgrounds), although it is often addressed indirectly, particularly in writings about immigrant students.

### Addressing Lack Of Traditional Participation

I do not claim here that class participation is not important. Students in many Western academic settings do need to learn the skills of asking and answering questions, formulating their own opinions and articulating them, and exchanging and discussing ideas in a respectful way. But by understanding problems students may have in these areas, and by making some adjustments to what is considered "participation," educators can show respect for students and their backgrounds, and help students become successful in their education.

How can instructors address the difficulties which these students have in participating actively in the classroom in traditional terms? First, just being aware of these students' dilemma is useful. Many teachers feel very comfortable in the academic world, and always have. They may themselves come from groups which take education, and their own success in the educational system, for granted. They may have difficulty seeing that others do not have that same sense of comfort, of entitlement; in fact, it may not occur to them to even consider this problem. So it is useful just to realize that the factors mentioned here, rather than laziness or inertia or lack of preparation, may very well account for lack of participation in many cases.

It can be useful for teachers to discuss this issue explicitly with students. Classes can discuss ways in which educational expectations are different in different cultures, and the point should be clearly made that one is not "better" than another, and that students

should not be asked to give up their own identities in order to succeed in a different educational system. But in order to give students tools with which to succeed in the system they are studying in, instructors can tell them why participating in discussion is considered essential in, for example, the American educational system. Such discussion not only lets the students know about instructors' expectations, but gives them reasons for such expectations. In addition, an instructor can give very specific examples of when and how students studying in an American school or university should speak out, ask questions, offer an opinion or analysis, and so on. Modeling, role playing, and watching videotaped examples can all be useful in a very practical way. Praising students' successes in this area, and building up their sense of confidence, can be helpful as well.

### Redefining Participation

Beyond such explicit instruction regarding expectations for traditional participation, it would be helpful and culturally sensitive for instructors to consciously widen their definitions of "class participation." Some students who do not speak much in class show their involvement in other ways. For example, body language provides many clues. Some students who are shy or reluctant to speak out clearly show their attentiveness and engagement by leaning forward, nodding their heads, turning to listen to the contributions of other students, smiling, and giving other nonverbal signs of engagement. Sometimes those students are signaling that they have something to add, but they cannot bring themselves to volunteer. If the instructor picks up on the signals such students are giving through their body language, she or he can call on those particular students and may well elicit very insightful contributions to the class discussion. Even if instructors don't call on such students, they can be alert to body language, and realize that (and give the students credit for the fact that) it often indicates a kind of very active, if not verbal, participation.

Some students want to participate by speaking out, but simply need more time to work up the courage and comfort level to volunteer, or to answer a question from the

instructor. Sometimes it is helpful simply to leave more time for contributions to be offered, or for students to answer questions, even if it means allowing a minute of silence.

Instructors tend to feel uncomfortable with silence, and hurry to fill the silence, but they could help some students immensely by allowing them a few seconds of extra time, and they might be very pleased with the quality of their contributions, contributions which would have otherwise been lost (Sadker & Sadker, 1994, 90-92). Or students may just need a few words of gentle encouragement (which may be perceived as "permission" by those who don't feel naturally entitled to initiate speaking) or praise (Sadker & Sadker, 1994, 50-55).

Instructors can also structure their class time in ways in which everyone will be more likely to speak out, rather than asking open-ended questions in such a way that the same few people tend to speak out often and dominate class discussion. For example, one can design activities in which each student will be given a specific question, then all students will be given a minute or two to think about their questions, and then all (or a teacher-determined selection of) students will be asked individually to answer their questions. This way each student has a specific goal to work on, as well as a little time to formulate an answer. Or one can design activities which require everyone to participate physically in, for example, doing an experiment, or creating something. This is easier to do in a science lab or in an art class than in other classes, but with a little creativity, language teachers and other teachers can design hands-on activities, even "games," as well. Then the participation consists of preparing for and executing the project, rather than just speaking. I was recently told about examples of such games used in mathematics classes at my own institution, and was told by the professors who created them that they were very successful in involving all the students in the classroom.

Or students can be asked to give short written responses to questions; these can be five or ten minute "response papers" which are then exchanged with classmates, and/or read aloud, and/or handed in to the instructor. Some students feel much more comfortable giving their analysis or opinions in writing than in speaking in front of a group. For example,

Gannett (1991) found that female students find the journal a comfortable place to express their opinions and feelings, and in fact write more than twice as much in class journals as male students do. Cardozo (1994) found that some of her students felt more comfortable writing about their opinions than sharing them in in-class discussions; in fact, she found that the "women who spoke up the least produced the most articulate, detailed, and, incidentally, grammatically correct writing in the class" (p. 26). Furthermore, she found that when these students were asked to read their written work aloud, other students listened attentively and appreciatively, and a lively discussion ensued.

Other students are willing and able to speak to the professor after class or during office hours. Or, these days, students can e-mail the professor and each other with questions and with discussion of class topics. All of these students should be given "credit" for these various types of "participation," broadly defined. And it is likely that as students receive acknowledgment of their forms of participation, they will develop confidence and, eventually, participate more often in the more traditional ways (e.g., speaking voluntarily during class discussions) as well.

In addition to addressing these issues in ESL and other classes, ESL and other instructors can be advocates for international and immigrant students, and other students with the characteristics discussed in this paper, educating their fellow faculty at schools and universities. This can be done through, for example, in-house and conference workshops, publications, and formal and informal conversations with colleagues.

### Conclusion

Educators in ESL and other classes cannot ignore the fact that students will encounter many situations where they will be penalized for not following the long-accepted (in many Western cultures) model of "class participation." We owe it to our students to explain these expectations and to give them tools to fulfill the expectations as appropriate. We may in fact have to be constantly trying to teach in ways that balance students' need for

such "acculturation" and their need and right to keep their own cultures and identities (Fox, 1994; Shen, 1989). But we can also try to step back from our taken-for-granted model of what "participation" in the classroom looks and sounds like, to understand reasons that this model is not the only possible one, and to set up our classrooms so that other types of participation are recognized and valued. We can be watchful for, and creative about, various ways of allowing students to participate. Doing so will be fairer to students and less culture-bound, and will allow students to show us what they know and what they have to contribute. In this way, the classroom may well become a more inclusive and positive place for all students.

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