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## **“We Participate, Silently”: Explicating Thai University Students’ Perceptions of Their Classroom Participation and Communication**

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# **“We Participate, Silently”: Explicating Thai University Students’ Perceptions of Their Classroom Participation and Communication**

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## **Abstract**

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This study explores Thai university students’ perceptions of their reluctance in verbal classroom participation especially in situations where English is used as the medium for instruction. It is generally perceived that non-native learners particularly from high context cultures such as Thailand have the tendency to remain silent during discussion sessions or when they are asked to participate in activities related to expressing their opinions. By investigating this phenomenon through focus group meetings with Thai university students, this study reveals reasons that cause students to be hesitant speakers in class through the eyes of students themselves. The results confirm that though students agree to the common perception of Asian students being quiet learners, they did not agree that they were passive learners; they emphasized the fact that they used ‘silence’ as a tool to quietly yet attentively participate. The study also highlights that students’ silence can be seen as a way to harmonize with the environment and situation which is the cultural norm in the Thai context.

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**Keywords:** high context cultures, silence, reticent conduct, cultural norms, classroom participation

# "Participamos, en Silencio": Percepciones de los Estudiantes Universitarios Tailandeses sobre su Participación y Comunicación en el Aula

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## Resumen

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Este estudio explora las percepciones de los estudiantes universitarios tailandeses sobre su reticencia a la participación verbal en el aula, especialmente en situaciones en las que se utiliza el inglés como medio de instrucción. En general, se percibe que los estudiantes no nativos, especialmente de culturas de alto contexto como la tailandesa, tienen la tendencia a permanecer en silencio durante las sesiones de debate o cuando se les pide que participen en actividades relacionadas con la expresión de sus opiniones. Al investigar este fenómeno a través de reuniones de grupos focales con estudiantes universitarios tailandeses, este estudio revela las razones que hacen que los estudiantes sean oradores indecisos en clase. Los resultados confirman que, aunque los participantes están de acuerdo con la percepción común de que los estudiantes asiáticos son estudiantes silenciosos, no están de acuerdo en que sean estudiantes pasivos; subrayan el hecho de que utilizan el "silencio" como herramienta para participar de forma silenciosa pero atenta. El estudio también pone de relieve que el silencio de los estudiantes puede considerarse una forma de armonizar con el entorno y la situación, que es la norma cultural en el contexto tailandés.

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**Palabras clave:** culturas de alto contexto, silencio, conducta reticente, normas culturales, participación en el aula.

Speaking in front of people and presenting ideas and/or persuading others can be a daunting experience and the anxiety related to these circumstances could increase if one has to deliver a speech or discuss ideas with others in a language different from one's mother tongue. This anxiety often affects speakers' achievement and is viewed as a negative factor in communication (Horwitz, 2001). However, it is crucial to continuously communicate with others as social beings and many times this expands to talking to and discussing with people one does not know well. At a time like this, unfortunately, Asian students are still widely perceived as being passive communicators especially in classroom contexts (Loh & Teo, 2017; Kember, 2009; Exley, 2005; Cheng, 2000). These groups of students are deemed largely as shy people who are unwilling to participate in class discussion or share their opinions and ask questions (Loh & Teo, 2017; Tran, 2013). Though a common theme in education, classroom participation is seldom particularized. It is commonly perceived as students' verbal activity that 'fits into a routine or a teacher-established pattern of classroom discourse' (Schultz, 2009, p.3) in which silence is rarely seen as a contribution to classroom work.

This study thus aims to investigate student silence and explore how this phenomenon is perceived by students themselves in a Thai context. More specifically, the focus is on students' perceptions on their own participation within classroom learning situation where English is used as a medium of instruction. Since the study holistically investigates Thai university students' reticence in classroom participation, instead of inviting students who were taking English language classes, the researcher invited participants with competent English language skills taking major courses in their own discipline.

By examining Thai students' perceptions towards their reluctance in speaking up in their classes, the study intends to elucidate differences in learning styles of Thai culture and shed light on these differences to call for more discussion in facilitating effective classroom participation.

In order to explore how Thai students, perceive their reluctant behavior and to investigate the reasons behind their perceptions, purposive sampling was employed. By examining students' beliefs and discernments of their unwillingness to speak up in class, this study tries to fill in the gap between the general perception that Asian students normally are passive learners due

to their personal attributes and how Thai students understand themselves as being called passive.

### **Factors that Drive Reticence in Classroom Participation**

Factors hindering students from verbally participating in class could be a multifaceted issue with various elements involved including individual and situational causes such as language proficiency level, social context, anxiety, motivation, cognitive conditions, gender and age (Shao & Gao, 2016; Cao, 2011; Ellis, 2008; Cao & Philp, 2006).

Several studies suggest that students' unwillingness to verbally communicate in class is largely due to their foreign language anxiety, a major reason behind their shyness (Chun, 2014; Lee, 2009; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Liu, 2006). Though these studies provide insights on certain positive and negative effects of using foreign languages in classroom, most of the studies were based on English language classrooms focusing on learning the language. This study therefore aimed to address and understand students' reticent in classroom participation by looking into non-language based classes such as business marketing, sociology, and economics courses to name a few inviting student participants with intermediate or higher level English skills who claimed they did not feel anxious speaking and/or writing in English.

Another factor that is perceived to drive communication apprehension, especially concerning oral participation, is cultural norms (Wu, 2015): especially in hierarchical societies where constant monitoring of performance tied to collective success affect learners' and workers' fear of negative evaluation by others (Saad, Cleveland, & Ho, 2015; Oh et al., 2014; King, McInerney, & Watkins, 2013; Lee, 2009). This in turn can lead to minimal verbal interaction. Liu and Jackson (2008) assert that this is particularly the case with Asian students whose high context socio-cultural backgrounds do not encourage them to critically evaluate others' opinions driving them to refrain from expressing their own views as well. However, verbal class participation is generally considered as the key factor of students' in-class performance (Jones, 2008). Thus, many teachers perceived that students from high context countries do not contribute to learning and are concerned that these students have the predispositions to shy away from verbal class participation (Bao, 2014; Kim, 2006).

**Socio-cultural factors: face-saving strategy and silence**

Though internal factors such as personal attributes largely affect language learning, it is also important to consider the socio-cultural beliefs and environmental aspects of where these learners are coming from since these external factors also play crucial roles in shaping learners' behaviors. Zimbardo (1981) stresses that shyness displayed by students can mean that they are extremely concerned about social evaluation by others; even the fear of disapproval by others can diminish one's self-consciousness. In sum, it could be the stress coming from societal judgment driving students to silence rather than anxiety related to using the target language. Cheng (2000) brings in a concept that Asian students are perceived as reticent learners not because of cultural attributes but due to specific situations that make them look like they are passive. It is interesting to note that Cheng (2000) believes Asian students have strong desire to participate, but often certain factors such as different teaching/learning methods, values, and attitudes do not allow them to do so. This notion is supported by Wu's (2015), Duff's (2010), Xia's (2009) and Littlewood's (1999) claim that local and academic cultures greatly affect learners' ability to understand and participate. Xia's (2009) and Liu's (2001) studies further discuss that classroom participation is shaped by various factors including pedagogical methods, sociocultural differences, cognitive aspects, and linguistic competences; when it comes to Asian international students in particular, it is observed that the lack of oral participation by these group of students were largely due to sociocultural reasons rather than linguistic incompetence. Quite a few studies elaborate that with appropriate encouragement and understandings of the cultural differences by teachers, Asian students do try to speak up and demonstrate their eagerness to share their ideas (Takahashi, 2019; Wu, 2015; Cheng, 2000; Littlewood, 1999).

Socio-cultural norms practiced in Thailand clearly indicate that Thai people place importance in harmonizing society: they focus on caring for others and strive for better quality of life as seen in many other collectivist societies (Loh & Teo, 2017; Deveney, 2005). Therefore, rather than being direct and vocal about their opinions, they tend to prefer implicit communication as a way to be 'face conscious', not to attract attention, and to show their respect to others (Ambele & Boonsuk, 2018). Loh and Teo

(2017) state that by graciously practicing this socio-cultural custom, Thai people make effort to ‘preserve the status quo and tradition, hence stability as a virtue’ (p. 197). It is therefore not surprising that this value extends into the classroom environment. Respect towards teachers is salient in the teacher-centered classroom where the teacher is expected to initiate and govern communication and students speak only when asked to do so (Howard, 2009); this is perceived as a collective pedagogical method in maintaining classroom harmony. By silently participating in class, Thai students believe they are displaying their respect as well as spending their energy focusing on the knowledge and wisdom teachers give out. They take education seriously since academic performance is deemed as the best way to succeed which also brings pride to the family (Loh & Teo, 2017; Chayakonvikom, Fuangvut, & Cannell, 2016).

It is generally perceived that in most Asian countries, passivity indicates students’ respect for teachers (Cheng, 2000). Hall’s (1976) concept of high context cultures is also in line with this; politeness is a widely practiced virtue that harmonizes the society. Lowering self and respecting others by listening rather than speaking is a social conduct deeply embedded in these high context cultures. Therefore, it is not surprising that many Asian students try to ‘silently participate’ rather than to speak up and state their opinions. Silent participation can be defined as keeping quiet verbally yet focusing and engaging with the speaker and the topic by actively listening (Kim, 2008). Goffman’s (1981) concept of participation supports this notion by stating that not only talk but silence too is shaped by social context. By practicing silence, they are following the socio-cultural norms of not critically assessing others’ opinions that helps maintain their social image, and at the same time pay respect to the speaker (Liu & Littlewood, 1997). Through silent participation, students are transferring the symbolic power towards the instructor by being quiet yet attentive recipients in the classroom context. Silence is understood in different ways depending on certain situational context which is perceived as a form of communication. Goodwin and Goodwin’s (2004) participation framework states that verbal and nonverbal interactions all count as valuable input. In certain cultural settings such as Japan, ‘wordless communication’ is more appreciated (Schultz, 2009).

Though generally Asian students are portrayed as a group shying away from oral participation, certainly there are differences among them; Chinese, Japanese, Malaysians, and Thais to name a few, may share similarities,

however, cultural practices, values, and reasons vary in these societies which may differentially affect participation in class discussions (Lee, 2009). In this regard, the current study focuses on Thai students and their perceptions towards oral participation in their classrooms.

### **Research Methodology**

In order to listen to students' voice on their behaviors, qualitative approach was deemed suitable to examine the phenomenon. To understand the link between participants' perceptions and notions on certain issues largely related to socio-cultural values and norms, the study was designed to look deep into the participants' experiential knowledge (Berkes, 2004). This study was approved by the Ethics Board (IRB) of the author's affiliation, Mahidol University (COA No.11-323); the Ethics Board made it clear that though the participants were competent English language users, the researcher must supply them with not only the English version of ethics documents but also the Thai version to confirm that there were no discrepancy between the English and Thai explanation of the study. Invitation letter and consent form were distributed to potential participants; the letter also invited them to email or call the researcher with any questions they might have before deciding to participate or opt out.

### **Research Site and Participants**

Thai students from the international college of a major university in Bangkok, Thailand were recruited; this international college provides academic program solely conducted in English and the majority of the Thai students admitted into this college have intermediate to advanced levels of English language competency with a minimum TOEFL score of 75 (out of 120). By using purposive sampling approach, 15 students who identified themselves as Thai, spoke the Thai language as their mother tongue and claimed their English skills ranged from moderate to advanced level, were chosen as interviewees. Purposive sampling was needed since it was necessary to have various levels of second language speakers of English as participants (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Out of 15 student participants, seven of them were male and eight were female, their ages ranging from 18 to 21 years old. They were all enrolled as full-time students

taking courses in their subject majors as well as taking some general education courses at the same time. Some participants knew one another well and took several courses together at the time the data was collected.

All 15 participants were enthusiastic and determined learners. Although they all came from different backgrounds, they had similar goals; they wanted to excel in their studies and they strongly stated that they tried their best to contribute to class discussion. In other words, they viewed themselves as active participants. The participants' names were anonymized by pseudonyms.

### **Data Collection Method: Focus Group**

Focus group interviews were selected as the data collection method. Since this study aimed to listen to students' perceptions of themselves within classroom settings, the researcher decided interaction amongst participants would generate dynamic data to gain collective view points and co-construct new knowledge based on group opinions (Gibbs, 2012; McLafferty, 2004). According to McLafferty (2004), focus group interviews can be an effective method to collect rich data from homogeneous groups on social realities of a culture; participants of the current study were all Thai students sharing a similar educational background within the same cultural context which fits well into McLafferty's idea of a group that may work effectively by utilizing the focus group method. The dynamic interactions amongst participants were expected to add value to the stories and experiences of individuals as 'the key in focus group data is capturing participants' ideas and attitudes as they develop through group interaction and exchange' (Kelly, 2003, p. 50).

One-on-one interview with students may have given more detailed narratives of individual participants, however, for this particular study, the researcher decided focus group could generate different sets of interesting data due to the collective interaction and conversation amongst students. By listening to what the other participants shared during the focus group meeting, all participants were enthusiastically encouraged to voice out their stories and perceptions.

Focus group discussions were arranged to unearth the participants' cognitive insights on their oral class participation and how they perceived it. The researcher randomly selected 30 students who had taken her Business Communication course (offered to second and third year students of all

majors) in the previous term and sent an email. Out of 30 emails sent, only 22 of them acknowledged that they had received the message; the invitation letter and consent form were then circulated to these 22 students and 15 of them positively responded.

Three focus group meetings were organized with six members in group A, four in group B, and five in group C depending on the participants' availability. The focus group meetings were designed to last about an hour and a half long for each group. Some of the participants knew one another which helped in gaining quick rapport amongst the members; after a short introduction, the participants were given some time to ask questions related to the research topic if they had any, and they were also encouraged to engage in informal discussions. They were also asked to pick pseudonyms so that their identities could be anonymized for the research.

The focus group meetings were conducted in English and led by the researcher who guided the conversation giving equal opportunities to the participants to share their perceptions and ideas; though all participants were Thai, they expected the meetings to be held in English since they knew the researcher, a foreign lecturer, would be conducting the meetings. The researcher also indicated in the invitation letter that the focus group meetings would be held in the English language. Before the focus group discussions, participants were invited to have a causal conversation with the researcher and the other participants.

The leading questions for the focus group meetings were as follows (they were asked to answer these questions and share their thoughts based on non-language courses they were taking at the time of the data collection):

1. How often do your professors/lecturers encourage and invite you to speak up in class?
2. How do you feel when you are asked to verbally participate?
3. Does your participation fluctuate amongst different classes?
4. Are there any other ways you show your teachers that you are actively participating?
5. Do you spot any differences when students from different cultural background participate in class? What are they?
6. Generally, we Asians are perceived as quiet/passive people in and outside the classroom. What do you think about this common perception?

7. Can you elaborate on personal attributes? Do you think personal characters, such as being shy, hinders you from verbal participation?
8. Can you tell me your experience in a specific class or situation when you felt like you wanted to talk more or wanted to keep silent?

## **Data Analysis**

Audio-recorded data were transcribed verbatim followed by data analysis. Data were analyzed by drawing on thematic analysis method that delivered key themes and patterns (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Since the emphasis was on participants' perceptions and beliefs, it was crucial to understand and interpret the data according to their experiences that enriched this study with various perspectives (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Denzin, 1997; Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2013). The main themes emerged from coding the data were; 1) silence: a form of participation, 2) silence: saving face from being judged, and 3) silence: harmonizing with the condition of the classroom. By coding and categorizing reoccurring words and phrases and repeated stories, the main themes were developed.

According to Hankok, Amankwaa, Revell, and Mueller (2016), focus group data can be more effectively presented when different methods of analysis are employed together to achieve data saturation. In order to determine data saturation, the researcher first looked into the themes derived from each group and checked how many times and how many respondents had brought up and elaborated on those certain themes. Themes emerged from all three groups were then pulled together and evaluated. The saturation point set by the researcher was five mentions per theme by at least half of the participants per group, which were recorded accordingly.

## **Results and Discussion**

The data revealed that English language only played a minor role in affecting participants' reticent behavior in classroom participation. Their unwillingness was largely governed by socio-cultural factors that generally define the national characteristics of Thai people, notably hesitancy in judging others and being judged by others. Collective Thai culture focuses on social harmony and keeping agreeable relationships with others (Knutson,

Komolsevin, Chatiket, & Smith, 2003) which causes people to be sensitive and reluctant in critically assessing the opinions of others and sharing their honest viewpoints. Simply put, for these particular Thai university students, it was not the anxiety brought by their English language skills but was the fear of their thoughts and opinion being judged and assessed by others—teachers and peers—that affected their passive participation.

The notion of ‘saving one’s face’ and being keen on how other people see and judge them is a socially constructed cultural characteristic that could be seen in various high context culture societies (Merkin, 2017; Zhang, Chintakovid, Sun, Ge, & Zhang, 2006). This societal practice of being serene and withholding from confronting others’ opinion is clearly shown in classroom situations as well. Students would rather listen, and perceived this as their way of active learning and participation. Interestingly, most of the participants did not relate their English language skills with the apprehension they felt during class; rather they stated that they would not speak up even in classes conducted in Thai which they saw as Thai classroom norms.

### **Theme 1: Silence, Just another Form of Participation**

The results showed that though internal or personal reasons somehow affected the participants’ unwillingness to verbally participate, it was the external factors that greatly influenced the learners’ reluctance. Instead of discussing personal traits hindering their partaking in class, all participants brought in cultural aspects as the main reasons for their reticence elaborating that keeping quiet yet attentive is another way of participating which needs to be acknowledged.

All 15 participants were confident that they had high motivation to learn and participate in class. The way some participants defined ‘participation’ was interesting, and this became the focus of this study. During the focus group discussion, one of the participants, Mook (female, 19), elaborated that she actively participated in class by being silent. To her, ‘silence’ does not mean being inactive and shying away from class involvement, but it is just another form of participation (Schultz, 2009). She argued that students can actively participate without saying anything by making good eye contact, taking good notes, and letting the teacher know that she is getting what the teacher is giving. She also said that:

Good teachers know, they somehow know that even though we (students) are not verbally speaking, they... know we are really interested in the lecture and trying our best to engage.

Sirada (female, 20) also backed this up:

True! I don't usually participate out loud, I mean...I don't talk in class because I'm afraid of what others will think about me. (It's) not because I am afraid of speaking. It's like...cultural, I think. I try my best to participate when teacher assigns us written tasks. We can participate by writing, too, I think.

Other participants enthusiastically agreed that silence in the classroom could mean students were actively listening and participating; participants strongly claimed that silence was normally used by Thai students in classroom when they tried to respect the teacher and paid careful attention to what was being said. Interestingly, three participants stated that they believed many teachers preferred students to be silent and saw that as being a good student.

Instead of openly sharing their ideas and opinion by verbal participation, students said they used silence for mutual agreement most of the time; by smiling and nodding they said they indicate their agreement and expected the teachers to understand what they mean by those body languages

I think I participate. I am being active with my body language [laughs] and I am sure my teacher knows that I am... (giving) my best in trying to get the material in my head quietly. I see it as a cultural thing, it's not a bad thing.' (Tor, male, 19)

They are displaying a different system and manner of participation which is strongly embedded in their cultural practices and norms which is in line with Hall's concept of high context culture where implicit non-verbal communication is valued more than spoken words (Hall, 1976). This is also supported by Kim's (2008) study on non-native graduate students enrolled in an American university in which the participants said their silence meant they were immersed and engaged. Participants voiced up saying that non-verbal communication should also be counted as a form of active involvement,

however, only verbal interaction were generally acknowledged as active participation which they felt was unfair.

Mook's idea clearly sums up the first theme:

We participate! And it's a different way of participation. You know, I am actively participating by keeping quiet. I am paying respect to my teacher by listening really carefully and not missing anything he says. Why do we have to express our opinion in spoken words? Just because someone speaks out a lot does not mean he is a good student. I mean, at least, here in our country.

## **Theme 2: Silence, a Cultural Norm for Saving Face**

All participants agreed that their reticence was not because they did not know the answers or did not have any opinion; they did admit that some times they stayed quiet since they were not sure how to answer or discuss the questions given. However, they claimed that most of the times, even though they knew the answers, they would still hold and preferred not to be the first one to shout out the answer. It was due to their anxiety of their opinion being judged by others which is culturally sensitive; they did not want to look senseless nor did they want to be perceived as showing off. In other words, they did not wish to stand out in class:

Oh, no. It's not the language. I mean, my English is not perfect but that does not hold me from speaking up in class. The main reason why I am usually quiet is that...it's the atmosphere...no one speaks and if I do, they will all look at me like, "here she goes again". I don't want that happening, you know. I see some students talk a lot in class and immediately I get two different feelings: wow, he's courageous and I sort of envy that and another feeling is...come on, stop showing off. (Praew, female, 20)

As discussed in the literature, people from high context cultures normally are highly sensitive when it comes to saving face which also affects their linguistic behavior (Kim, 1993). They show respect to others by keeping their opinion to themselves and at the same time expect others to do the same; this is how they have maintained societal order for a long time which has become their cultural norm: to be considerate and not to cause discomfort for others

(Komin, 1991). This is clearly shown in the classroom settings as well. As the participants confirmed, they did not want to be assessed by their teachers and/or peers within classroom settings by speaking up. They said that if their ideas and opinions were criticized, even in the mildest manner, they would feel devastated and ashamed since it is deemed as a negative assessment demeaning their social faces which would extend to their families. Aom and Tong's thoughts saliently reveals this notion:

I don't think it's because the lectures are in English. English is not my first language but I can still express myself in it. I think...normally we don't speak up much because we don't want to annoy other people. I also don't want to be judged by others – that scares me. (Aom, male, 18)

And but...sometimes I really don't have anything to say! Also when it's too quiet, my confidence fades...language barrier...ummm, yes, but it's not a big deal. We all understand what others are saying anyway. It's more of a cultural thing. We are not used to being put in the centre to give opinions...I feel so nervous because other people look at me and judge me. (Tong, female, 19)

They also agreed that positive judgments by the teachers and peers was a good thing, but somehow it might also cause others to think badly of them. Collectively, these data suggest that Thai students perceived that giving different opinions would be judged by others and that judgment would in some way affect them. The fear of being evaluated has been shown to affect students' behavior in being reluctant in voicing their thoughts in other contexts as well (Keltner & Buswell, 1997). The social embarrassment these people feel is deeply rooted in society. Therefore, the reason people shy away from voicing their opinions cannot be separated into external or internal factors rather, it is a complex mixture of both (Robinson and Ellis, 2008).

Out of 15 participants, 8 of them agreed that there were times when they wanted to voice up their opinion and question some statements made by the teachers but withheld from doing so. By remaining silent, they said they were being attentive and at the same time saving the teachers' faces since they did not want the teachers to feel embarrassed by students' confrontation or argument. Participant Ploy (female, 21) illustrates this point:

Maybe we don't feel comfortable participating verbally because of our culture...I'm not sure, but I feel like it is. Or maybe it's our individual problem but since most of us feel the same way, I'm thinking it's because of our culture. We are generally quiet people who do more listening than talking...this is respect.

They also elaborated that it not only saved the teacher's face but saved their faces, too, since if one argues and questions a teacher, other classmates will judge the student:

Yes, they'll (peers) think like, "oh gosh, look at her! Being rude to the teacher!

(Sirada) which is in line with Nakane's (2007) study that claims silence is practiced by Asian students to save face.

Students did not perceive their English skills as the main reason for their reticence in class. They were confident in their ability to use the language when needed; though they did accept the fact that English was a foreign language to them and that they did not speak it as fluently as the natives, they said they felt they were able to communicate well using it. It must be noted that there were different reasons for students to refrain from verbally participating in class; none of the participants mentioned that they were hesitant in speaking up due to their accent which was different from the study by Chung and Payne (2017). In Chung and Payne's (2017) research on Korean adult students, Korean participants claimed that they felt embarrassed when speaking in front of others since their accent was not authentic. Korean students revealed that the fear of getting the language wrong in front of the natives were bigger than the cultural factors; Korean students paid much attention to their accent, pronunciation, and grammatical mistakes implying they were reluctant to verbally participate due to linguistic reasons. The majority of the Korean students in Chung and Payne (2017) said they wanted to share their opinions, but it was the fear of making mistakes using this foreign language that made them become quiet learners. When it came to the Thai students of this study, however, their unwillingness to participate verbally was largely due to being judged by others on their opinion or ideas, not on their language skills. They also did not want to look like they were showing off. Although both Korean students and Thai students—all from

Asian countries—had common behaviors of being reticent, the reasons behind their quietness were not the same.

The participants' attitude towards the English language and the competence they gained from various experiences using the language actually added to their motivation to study harder; these positive effects did not, however, relate with speaking up in the classroom. Therefore, it is credible to convey their unwillingness to speak out to multidimensional reasons such as the complex mixture of cultural, societal, and educational practices of the society they come from which in turn influences the internal factors of these students.

### **Theme 3: Silence, a Way to Collectively Harmonize the Environment**

According to the participants of the current study, culturally engraved societal practices affect internal factors which in turn largely influence students' behaviors in classrooms. Silence can work well in the classrooms at Thai universities since it is the cultural norm (Komolsevin, Knutson, & Datthuyawat, 2010); by silently participating, students are collectively trying to harmonize the classroom dynamics by transferring the power to the teacher. Though generally students' silence is often viewed negatively (Schultz, 2009), the same perception does not apply to certain contexts. One of the participant, Fon (male, 20), made an interesting comment stating that he believed teachers appreciated the quietness since it indicated that students were paying attention to the lecture in class and that also showed respect toward the teachers. This also aligns with Takahashi's (2019) assertion that in-class participation means much more than just participation; it is about understanding the role and value of communication that construct the dynamics of power and knowledge sharing in the classroom. Silence can indeed be a form of participation especially when larger social context such as cultural practices affects students to be reticent (Schultz, 2009). Also, by staying quiet yet attentive, students perceive that they are contributing to harmonizing the classroom environment where everyone can feel like being respected. The following excerpt from one of the focus group meetings palpably illustrates this point. Students here implicitly discuss the importance of harmony in class: respecting everyone and understanding and appreciating the quiet flow people are used to.

**Yut:** Maybe some people need to talk it out in order to get what the teacher is saying but for me, I need silence. By being silent, I am organizing the lecture in my head and that's active learning to me. I also, I think this is our way of showing respect to other students, too.

**Auu:** Yeah, a part of me says, go ahead and share your opinion! But another part of me says, hey, no one is talking, you better not talk, either. It's just that we don't want to be that person who stands out.

**Jirapat:** People who speak really good English don't participate, so, it's not because of language. And me too, me too. Not because of my English skills. I am very confident when I am alone with professor, then I can talk a lot. But when it's a large class, I don't want to stick out...uhhh...stand out. I like it when no one notices me. But I'm not shy.

**Nuntita:** I'm not a shy person, either. Maybe it's the environment? It's just...we don't feel comfortable speaking in class. Because, in class, everything is quiet and then I want to be quiet.

**Fon:** I don't think it's the environment. I think Thai people are generally quiet, not only in classrooms but mostly everywhere. I also think our teachers appreciate it if we are quietly paying attention to their lectures.

**Nuntita:** Yes, I agree. I think it's going to affect how the teacher sees me. I'd rather not talk and be just one of the students. I don't want to be the one that disrupts...uh, the peaceful classroom. But I think I'm not quiet when we do small group discussions.

Silence in the classroom can carry multiple meanings, therefore it should not be viewed as negative. Silent students who listen and/or write 'actively' should be recognized as dynamic participants since they also take part in co-constructing the learning in the classroom context. Thus, they contribute in creating new meanings and values in class. This 'silence' is especially important and meaningful in collective cultures where societal harmony is heavily valued. Schultz's (2009) statement nicely captures this notion; '[t]he students are not always silent; they are silent in response to locally specific contexts and activities' (p. 24).

## **Conclusion and Implications**

This study investigated the perceptions of Thai university students on their reticence in classroom participation to gain insights into this behavior. The data revealed that this was largely caused by social factors governed by cultural norms rather than individual characteristics for this particular group of university students.

The main result from this study was that this group of students perceived their ‘silence’ as an act of participation and at the same time an effective way of saving face by avoiding judgement; Silence did not mean shying away for many of these students, rather it meant they were organizing their thoughts in order to deeply comprehend what was being said and taught. The majority of the participants believed that it was much better to keep silent and reflect on and think about what they had learned than actually speaking their thoughts out only to be judged by others. They also perceived that the teachers would comprehend their silence and understand that this was how they learned. Also, the participants saw silence as an effective method to keep the classroom dynamics in harmony.

The participants largely agreed that English language was not the reason for their silence; they noted that they would be quiet in classrooms conducted in Thai as well. It was not the language but the cultural atmosphere of silently participating and comprehending the lectures that was deeply embedded in every corner of the Thai society. Rather than voicing out opinions, Thai students would actively listen which is their way of active participation and communication.

Constant assessment and constructive criticism by others are perceived as beneficial to those from certain cultures. However, this does not apply to everyone nor every society. This cultural difference in recognizing active participation needs to be examined holistically in order to understand where numerous students from different backgrounds are coming from. Instead of viewing students’ silence negatively and perceiving that their lack of participation is due to their apprehensive characteristics, new approaches for these students to enthusiastically share ideas using different methods without ignoring their cultural norms and practices are needed. This can be achieved by understanding socio-cultural contexts and coming up with different

methods to participate since students' behaviors in class are caused not only by their personal characteristics but largely by various social factors.

This study sheds light on comprehending the reasons behind student silence in class. Depending on individual and cultural beliefs and contexts, learners accept, interpret, and adapt the meaning of 'participation' in different ways. It is crucial to think through different elements that influence students' behaviors in class and improve pedagogic approaches to assist their needs so that they can truly learn and communicate in a relaxing manner without feeling anxious or embarrassed. Class participation can mean any contribution made while learning takes place in the classroom such as group activities, written activities, or even something simple like raising hands and nodding (nonverbal participation). The participants of this study suggested that teachers should not only include verbal activities as participation; the nonverbal participation also signals that students are actively taking part in learning (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004).

Societal and cultural circumstances inevitably play vital roles in forming certain shared characteristics of its people; listening, rather than speaking, is a feature shaped by the Thai society and Thai students are simply conforming to their cultural and societal behaviors. Socio-cultural practices influencing people's behavior supports the notion that Thai university students' reticent behavior is due to an intricate combination of both micro and macro reasons shaping people's attitudes and behavior within a certain context. This needs to be comprehended and recognized by teachers, especially foreign instructors coming from different cultural backgrounds, that silent participation is actually a form of involvement in certain countries.

Educators, especially those from different cultural backgrounds, should be able to support students by focusing on understanding their needs and different learning methods. Since silence does not mean incompetence in certain societies, it should not be perceived as a passive characteristic; rather teachers/educators should reflect on the teaching methods and pedagogy they are practicing and actively monitor how they are received by students. Mutual understanding between teacher and student is crucial to reduce the misconception of silent participation (Liu, 2001): addressing clear classroom objectives, elaborating on the students' roles during class, and providing enough time to practice and fully understand classroom discourse strategies could greatly help students to grasp the reasons why many teachers encourage them to orally participate. By imposing oral participation teachers

may unconsciously be affecting students to fear speaking up in class; teachers should clearly be aware of how critical their attitudes are when it comes to creating comfortable learning environment. A warm and inviting classroom environment can enhance students' motivation positively driving them to actively participate. Based on this, teachers could implement various teaching strategies bringing in cultural and/or relatable topics students can competently discuss (Lee, 2009). Since writing is seen as less stressful way to participate (Cheng, 2000), letting students write more in class and share their writings by reading what they have written can also give them a chance to orally participate. This of course can take time and may require the teacher to spend more time establishing and implementing different ways in effectively run classroom discussions. As Tani (2008) asserts the demystification of the 'Asian learner' is crucial: generalizing individual student behavior should be avoided and open communication between educators and learners is an essential factor for healthier classroom learning.

Due to the small number of participants, this study cannot and does not claim that it represents the perspectives of all Thai universities students. Further studies with a larger population of participants are recommended using various methods to add knowledge and provide more insight into this phenomenon. Although this study provides a limited viewpoint of a small population, it offers teachers some points to consider and gives the space to think about and understand how students want utilize different ways to contribute in class.

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