

Quiet, but only in class: reviewing the in-class participation of Asian students

Massimiliano Tani
Australian Defense Force Academy, University of New South Wales
m.tani@adfa.edu.au

Abstract: *This paper presents a teaching innovation that has proved successful in stimulating the in-class participation of Asian students. The innovation consists of using written communication as an additional tool to clarify material and to promote discussions. Although this innovation has been introduced in too few classes to draw a general conclusion, its results suggest that Asian students are willing to actively participate to discussions. Teachers can therefore unlock their Asian students' potential to speak up. These observations are in line with the literature, suggesting that the quiet behaviour of Asian students is related to cultural elements (including language skills) rather than a specific approach to learning. They are also consistent with the insights arising from a large student survey carried out at the National University of Singapore.*

Key Words: *in class participation, Asian students.*

Introduction

One of the most visible differences that Asian students bring to class is a low level of in-class participation. Typically this is interpreted as a barrier to the fostering of good learning practice, as participation is viewed as an activity that develops independent learning skills and the ability to apply knowledge (e.g. Sivan, Leung, Woon and Kember, 2000). The lack of it is generally a signal of the reverse. In the case of international students, low participation is also viewed as an obstacle to engaging with campus life and fully benefiting from studying in another country (Hodne, 1997). These considerations are commonly shared by university teachers, though these views are perhaps biased by geography. In higher education institutions in the West, students' participation is generally expected; and teaching evaluations often ask whether or not it is encouraged in class.

A peculiar feature of Asian students' low participation is that it appears to be confined to classrooms. In contrast, Asians are very talkative outside of lecture times and during consultation hours. Although there is a large literature dealing with Asian students (according to the ERIC database, in early 2005 the term "Asian students" has been the subject of over 4,800 journal articles and books!), there are fewer studies discussing cases and/or techniques where their low participation has been successfully increased. This paper aims to contribute to the case study literature by presenting a teaching innovation, which consists of using written communication as an additional tool to stimulate discussions. This innovation has worked in my classes, and its relative success is reviewed in light of the existing literature and the data collected through a large student survey carried out at the National University of Singapore (NUS) in February 2004.

The idea of using written communication to complement oral discussion originated from a 'learning contract' established with the Teaching and Learning Unit at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), whereby I had to introduce a teaching innovation, and evaluate its effectiveness. My contract aimed at gaining a better understanding of the cultural diversity that Asian students bring to class, with a view to becoming a more effective teacher. As experienced by many other academics, I was puzzled by the ease with which I could establish a dialogue with Asian students outside of the lecture hall relative to their silence in class. The initial interest in this topic has since then developed into a research project focusing on whether teachers can

exploit students' heterogeneity to improve teaching and learning outcomes. There is a growing empirical literature suggesting that diversity enhances productivity and output in organisations (e.g. Hopkins and Hopkins, 1994) and cities (e.g. Peri and Ottaviano, 2004). My research applies this hypothesis to classrooms.

The discussion is organised as follows: Section 2 contextualises the motivation for this study while Section 3 reviews some of the insights that are made in the literature on Asian students' learning and participation. Section 4 discusses the teaching innovation. Section 5 presents the results and offers interpretations. Section 6 reviews the results in the context of a large student survey carried out at NUS. Section 7 concludes.

Throughout the paper the word 'Asian' is used to mean students whose cultural background is mainly Confucian, no matter where they are born or live. Similarly the word 'Western' is used with reference to Anglo-Saxon practices rather than to the entire group of cultures that exist in the West. This (mis)use of the words 'Asian' and 'Western' reflects an imprecision that is common in the educational literature and that needs to be addressed and rectified, though doing this is beyond the scope of this paper.

Why Asian students matter for Australia (and other countries)

From an Australian perspective, there are valid reasons to be interested in Asian students. First, teaching Asian students is increasingly common in Australia, raising at once challenges for teachers facing Asian students for the first time and a growing demand to share experiences and techniques to achieve relevant teaching and learning objectives. Australia has an increasing number of students coming from a 'diverse' family background. About 50% of Australian students come from families with one foreign parent, many of them from Asia (Sinclair and Britton Wilson, 1999). The issue of teaching effectively to Asian-Australian students is becoming more important, and teaching evaluation instruments are increasingly geared towards this topic. Yet, Asian students still face misconceptions about their lack of in-class participation, and ways of learning (e.g. Chalmers and Volet, 1997; Hellsten, 2002).

Second, Australia is in the international higher education market. As such, to draw foreign students it competes with other major English-speaking countries that have traditionally provided higher education to international students, especially from Asian countries. From an economic point of view, the net trade balance of higher education for Australia is more than A\$ 6 billion per annum and this figure rises each year (e.g. Kalantzis and Cope, 2000). As the number of students from Asia is expected to increase dramatically in the near future with the involvement of China as a major world economy, the ability to teach effectively students with a Confucian background acquires a strategic value in enhancing the credibility of the Australian higher education system, its desirability, and its financial health.

Last but not least, as Australian teachers debate the impact of Asian students on Australia's classroom dynamics, there is a parallel growing interest in Asian universities such as the National University of Singapore, the Hong Kong University and the Beijing Business School, among others, about the effectiveness of Western teaching methods. This interest and the literature that it generates provide Australia-based teachers with additional insights on how Asian students learn; and it also provides us with valuable opportunities, not only to compare student behaviours observed in Asian and Australian classrooms, but also to undertake comparative joint research projects.

The low participation of Asian students: a brief literature review

The quiet in-class behaviour of Asian students is by no means new or limited to Australian classes. As an example, Biggs (1991) himself "found the deathly silence that preceded the start of the lecture quite unnerving, the more so when my open-ended questions met with no response. I had to plough on, and if, as was likely, I ran out of prepared material, I had to *ad lib* until the scheduled end of the lecture" (p.3). Scollon and Wong-Scollon (1991), Hodne (1997), Chu and Kim (1999); Kember (2000); Woodrow and Sham (2001); Watson (1999), and Biggs (1999) amongst others make similar comments, highlighting the visible contradiction between in- and

out-of-class behaviour. “Westerners are often puzzled by the contrast between café’ and classroom behaviour of Chinese students: so demure and shy in the classroom, so noisy and boisterous in the café” (Biggs, 1999, pp.127-8).

The literature addressing the low participation of Asian students can be broadly divided in two streams. The first focuses on the mechanics of the learning process and studies the in-class silence of Asian students as a result of their learning strategy. In this context, being quiet in class is part of the broader ‘puzzling’ contrast between high academic achievements and an approach to learning, which, according to early studies (e.g. Marton and Saljo, 1976a,b; Saljo, 1979), should lead to the opposite outcome. The second stream studies the low levels of participation as a result of influences surrounding the learning decisions, such as the students’ cultural background and tradition, language skills, and the types of environment and individual circumstances in which learning occurs. The insights of both streams are briefly reviewed below.

Low participation as a result of the learning strategy adopted by Asian students

This literature stems from cognitive psychology and analyses the constituent elements of learning. The resulting conceptualisation identifies a number of elements that can be organised hierarchically. These range from the quantitative increase of one’s knowledge and notions to learning as an interpretative process aimed at the understanding of reality (e.g. Saljo, 1979), and to changing as a person (e.g. Marton, Dall’Alba, and Beaty, 1993). The elements located at the higher end of the hierarchy portray learning as a process characterised by one’s desire to understand and absorb a topic for its own sake and beyond the years of formal education. Those able to acquire such elements develop life-long learning skills that enable them to withstand life at large. The traditional classification of students according to learning attitudes includes ‘deep’ learners, the ideal type where students engage in the understanding of meaning (Biggs, 1987); ‘surface’, where students memorise and reproduce information (Biggs, 1987); and ‘achieving’, where students focus predominantly on grades (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983).

Teachers can influence students to develop or be redirected towards deep learning attitudes, particularly when they adopt teaching strategies that focus on students’ learning rather than content delivery (e.g. Meyers and Jones, 1993; Kember, 2001). Student-centred teaching emphasises the application of ‘active learning’, in which students directly engage in their learning process through learning-by-doing and learning-by-learning. In-class participation is a component of the basic elements of active learning (talking and listening; the remaining are reading, writing and reflecting), which “involve cognitive activities that allow students to clarify, question, consolidate and appropriate new knowledge” (Meyers and Jones, 1993 p. 21). As a result, it contributes to students’ development of independent learning skills, knowledge, and other deep learning attitudes that are beneficial for one’s career.

The myth of the Asian learner

Asian students generally display learning behaviours that can be classified as ‘surface’ and/or ‘achieving’, such as the low participation in class, but commonly reach learning and academic outcomes that are typically associated with a ‘deep’ learning approach. Interpreting this apparent paradox as the result of some distinctive feature of Asian students is a common feature of early studies, as documented by the literature on misinterpretations about Asian students among university teachers and administrators in Australia and elsewhere (e.g. Samuelowicz, 1987; Ballard and Clanchy, 1997; Chalmers and Volet, 1997; Volet and Tan-Quigley, 1999; or Biggs, 1996 for surveys). Subsequent work has focused on ‘opening up’ the black box surrounding the way in which Asian students learn. This research has yielded important insights into the mechanics of learning, and has helped the development of more accurate instruments for data collection.

The end of the myth I: new insights on the mechanics of learning

Demystifying the stereotypes associated with Asian students has occurred along two broad approaches. The first investigates the validity of the relationship between learning approach (input) and learning outcome (output) in the traditional taxonomy of learners. Studies in this

literature reverse early impressions that the achieving learning motivation and approach are not conducive to learning, and uncover new insights into the mechanisms through which one understands. For example, Watkins and Biggs (1996) find that the achieving approach is not only statistically positively and significantly correlated to learning, but also that the average magnitude of the correlation is almost identical to that arising from a deep learning approach (+0.19 vis-à-vis +0.20, respectively). This is in stark contrast with the coefficient arising between learning and surface approach (-0.11). Marton, Dall'Alba and Tse (1996) highlight that memorisation is a much more complex strategy than mere rote learning, as had been commonly thought, as repetition can actually deepen understanding. By repeating, the learner focuses on slightly different aspects of what is being memorised at each passage, with a positive effect on comprehension. More recent research has found that memorising itself is not a homogeneous process, but it encompasses different varieties, only some of which help with understanding. In particular, Meyer (2000) has shown that memorising as a process to store material after (rather than before) it has been understood helps understanding, prompting the call for the use of survey instruments that adequately represent contrasting forms of memorisation, and, implicitly, for updating those which do not.

The end of the myth II: comparative studies of Asian and Western students

The second approach studies the characteristics of Asian learners from a wider perspective, either by evaluating their response to a change in learning circumstances (e.g. the passage from high school to university, the introduction of active learning teaching techniques) or analysing their approach vis-à-vis corresponding Western students. In this literature, work by Kember (2000, 2001) suggests that much of the 'peculiarity' of Asian students' approach to learning is often nothing else than a lack of familiarity with the meaning and practice of deep learning. Using the evidence collected in the Action Learning Project, an inter-institutional project aiming at improving the quality of student learning across Hong Kong's seven universities through 90 projects focused on improving the quality of teaching, Kember posits that Asian students can develop deep learning strategies, given the opportunity. However, they need to be given time and initial guidance to adjust, and, perhaps more importantly, they need to be given a curriculum, teaching and assessments that are consistent with fostering a deep learning approach. The causes of Asian students' reticence to participate in class are therefore not to be found in the characteristics of their learning approach, but in the practice of their teachers! Recent Australian experience supports this conclusion. In a survey of Asian and Australian students at the University of New South Wales, Ramburuth and McCormick (2001) find that Asians and Australians do not differ in their overall learning approach. Most differences are confined to some elements of the learning process, such as learning constructs and styles, which could be linked to socio-cultural and environmental factors rather than individual characteristics. International comparative research by Littlewood (2000) also indicates that variation in attitudes to learn is higher between individuals within each country than between European and Asian nations.

The progressive demystification of the Asian learner as a distinct type and the recent evidence of there being no differences in learning approaches between Asian and Australian students support my own anecdotal experience with Asians, as a teacher and researcher in both Australia and Singapore. Specifically, all the evidence, both analytic and anecdotal, point towards the elimination of the role of an Asian approach to learning as a likely cause of my Asian students' low in-class participation.

Low participation as a result of influences surrounding learning decisions

The second group of studies investigating the lack of in-class participation of Asian students focuses on the role of factors that surround the student's relationship with the learning process. Within this heterogeneous literature, there are at least three different sub-streams, each of which is reviewed in the sections below.

The effect of Asian culture

This sub-stream highlights the importance of 'Asian culture' in affecting students' behaviour, and particularly the role played by those factors associated with values and traditions of Asian philosophies and ways of life. A common theme in this literature is the impact of Confucianism

in shaping the values and public behaviours of (amongst others) Chinese, Korean and Japanese students. Confucianism values stress the importance of harmony over conflict, and of collective rather than individual self-expression, which may result in students preferring to ask questions in private with the teacher rather than in class (e.g. Volet and Tan-Quigley, 1999).

My teaching experience can relate to these considerations. However these hypotheses are questioned by recent research (e.g. Cheng, 2000), which highlights that Confucianism's value for the respect of knowledge and knowledgeable persons is also accompanied by explicit reference to active learning. Confucianism's view of learning as an active process can be illustrated with the two well known sayings: (a) "the teacher does not always have to be more knowledgeable than the pupil; and the pupil does not always have to be less learned than the teacher" (Cheng, 2000 p. 440); and (b) "a good student should study hard and always be ready to ask questions" (ibid.). Furthermore analysis of the two characters composing the word knowledge in Chinese translate into 'learn' and 'ask' (Liu and Littlewood, 1997).

A second common topic in this literature is the impact of the fear of 'losing face' (e.g. Irwin, 1996; Watson, 1999), which threatens the student whenever s/he is at risk of violating a community standard (e.g. by failing an exam, or interrupting a teacher during a lecture). Losing face can lead to a loss of self-esteem and reputation in the group or community, and to poor academic performance. This suggestion is, however, contested by studies attributing students' anxiety to particular teaching strategies (e.g. Tsui, 1996) rather than to a general cultural feature.

The relationship between the student and the teacher in Asia

The second sub-group of studies highlights the role of strict student-teacher behavioural rules in Asia, attributing the lack of Asian students' in-class participation to the existence of clear and strict roles and responsibilities to which both students and teachers must abide. For example, asking questions during a lecture is equivalent to showing lack of understanding or respect, and by doing so a student discredits the teacher, an outcome which is not acceptable (e.g. Ballard and Clanchy, 1997; Liu, 2002). Similarly, a student would reply 'yes' to a teacher asking whether s/he has understood what was explained, even when this is not the case (e.g. the student then asks their friends for clarification), as a different answer would be regarded as an insult for the teacher (e.g. Gilhotra and Callender, 1995). However, there is significant counter-evidence that this is a generalised behaviour among Asian students in both Asian (e.g. Kember, 2001) and Western classrooms (e.g. Stephens, 1997).

The influence of language skills abilities, and related issues

The third sub-stream focuses on 'technical' explanations, such as self-esteem, and language skills. For example Brick and Louie (1994) find that Asian students typically regard correctness as a highly desirable quality. Hence, they fear appearing foolish by making mistakes as simple as grammar or pronunciation imperfections if they actively participate in class, as these can have significant consequences for them, such as being laughed at by friends and classmates. The difficulty in expressing oneself in another language seems common among Asian students abroad (e.g. Cheng, 2000; Woodrow and Sham, 2001), and is brought forward as a more likely cause of lack of participation relative to other 'external' factors. For example, research has found that despite good scores in international tests of linguistic proficiency (e.g. Test Of English as a Foreign Language - TOEFL), Asian students' linguistic knowledge does not match their competence in communicating in a foreign language (Liu, 2000). Lack of language competence may also negatively influence self-esteem, and hence limit in-class participation (e.g. Watkins, 1996). Impeded participation due to language difficulties also emerges from interviews with Asian and other international students themselves in research directed towards relieving their problems while at university (e.g. Lee, 1997).

The insights from the literature briefly summarised in this section gave me a better appreciation of the complexity surrounding a relatively simple behaviour observed in class (silence!). At the same time, they helped me to focus on communication as a key element of the relationship

between teachers and students, and teaching and learning. As a result, communication was the field in which I wanted to introduce a teaching innovation for my class.

A teaching innovation

My school is located in a military college, where local students are almost exclusively white Australians with an English-speaking background. International students have an Asian, predominantly Chinese, background, and come from overseas defence establishments in China, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam. There are a number of international students in my course, but no Asian-Australians.

I teach a graduate course in Finance and Investment Appraisal, which is part of a Masters of Management. It is a mandatory course, and students come from a variety of educational backgrounds. As the topics covered are generally perceived as being 'dry', I try to present them by using students' personal and work-related case studies to illustrate concepts and techniques. Lectures take place in the evening for 3 hours, from 4.30 to 7.30 once a week. A lecture typically takes 45 minutes, followed by a 15-20 minutes break, which in turn is followed by exercises (or the reverse order if in the second half of the semester), and a wrap up session.

Deciding exactly what teaching innovation to introduce was difficult, despite the relative ease with which I had chosen it to be in the broad area of communication. What made me decide to use a written tool as an ice breaker for discussion was the recurrent finding that linguistic ability determines active oral participation, particularly when Asian students are in mixed classes in Western universities rather than in predominantly Asian classes at home. I found illuminating research that highlighted the fact that socio-cultural and affective factors are the most important determinants underlying a negative perception of oral communication among international Asian students at the University of Minnesota (Liu, 2000 and 2002). Easing oral communication has been suggested as being a key first step in integrating Asian students on US university campuses (Asian Pacific American Education Advisory Committee, 1990). The use of written communication (from question cards to writing on the board) as an effective means to facilitating participation is reinforced by comments made by Asian students themselves about what teachers can do to relieve their difficulties at university (Lee, 1997). My preference for a 'questions-writing time' also had the additional benefit of satisfying the constraints imposed by my 'contract' with the Centre for Learning and Teaching: namely an easy-to-introduce teaching innovation whose effect could be evaluated in only a matter of weeks from its introduction.

The natural choice of when to locate the question writing time was in the lecture break. At the end of the first part of the lecture, I explained to students the nature of task involved: writing down a question and/or feedback that had not been addressed during the lecture. I handed a stack of paper to two student representatives named just before the break. I clarified that the exercise was to bring into class questions that were often asked elsewhere, but which could benefit all those attending. This exercise was totally voluntary and anonymous. The two representatives were changed each week. No mark for participation was connected with the exercise or for collecting the written questions. Given the length of the break, I thought there was sufficient time to formulate a question, particularly in the case of Asian students with a non-English speaking background. To be given enough time to address or formulate a question is important for non-English speaking students, as found by research and highlighted by Asian students themselves (Hodne, 1997).

I collected and reviewed the cards at the start of the second part of the lecture, and used the questions as an ice breaker for discussion and/or setting and solving problems.

Results

I initially planned to collect data on the effectiveness of the exercise through a short questionnaire. However, realising that only some of the students had used the innovation, I opted for a more general survey (Critical Incidence Questionnaire - CIQ) and personal records in a diary. From my observations, the innovation worked well. First of all, questions were collected:

in the first week there were only a couple of questions (45 enrolments – 16 Asian students), but they grew in number as time went on. They were 7 at the end of the third and last week of the course. I repeated the innovation from the inception of the course in the following year (43 enrolments – 15 Asian students) and collected 5 questions in the first week 10 in the following and 7 in the third week. The number of questions remained approximately constant at that level throughout the rest of the course. The innovation of the previous year had become routine.

Second, I also recorded that some of the Asian students started to participate in discussions and I received fewer visits for questions of a general nature during consultation hours. General questions were the most common among those collected through the innovation. I also recorded that, outside class, questions from my Asian students were fewer, but they were more specific and targeted.

Third, based on CIQ, some students seem to have recognised the usefulness of the teaching innovation as a tool to enhance participation in class. The CIQ had only three questions, asking students about the three best and worst attributes of the course, respectively, as well as what students would have retained and/or modified for future editions. No personal information was requested. All questions were open. The answers generally highlighted the strengths of the course, and particularly a teaching style emphasising applications and cooperation with the teacher and amongst students. The main negative comment was the structure over three hours at night (which unfortunately could not be changed). Five students out of the 43 respondents in the first year replied that one of the best attributes of my course was an atmosphere that was conducive to participation and discussion, where there was no fear of making use of ‘innovative techniques’ to encourage students’ active participation. No student mentioned my teaching innovation in the ‘three things you liked the least’ question. Similar patterns emerged in the following year (13 positive comments about the friendly environment out of 43 respondents).

Although it is not possible to draw general conclusions from the evidence gathered, it is nevertheless possible to contextualise (my perception of) the relative success of this innovation. Despite the observed silence, my Asian students displayed a willingness to participate to class discussions, by contributing questions and eventually taking the risk of speaking publicly. This underlying willingness is not uncommon, nor is the potential to speak up (Liu and Kuo, 1996; Hodne, 1997; Littlewood, 1999; Lee, 1997). Asian students are generally found to value in-class discussions as a means of improving understanding. The use of a written instrument also contributed to its success. Writing is emotionally less stressful than speaking in class (Liu, 2000; Cheng, 2000). As it draws more on the studied English language being used relative to speaking, it eliminates much of the anxiety created by the direct identification of the speaker or the speed at which speaking occurs relative to writing (Hodne, 1997). Possibly, it also eliminates the unfamiliarity of being in a mixed rather than an all-Asian classroom. The recourse to written communication as an aid to oral participation is a common strategy among Asian students, particularly when oral participation is assessed: they write questions in advance, and at times they even write all what they intend to say (Davis, 1993).

There seems to be no literature analysing the relationship between in-class participation and frequency of contact with the teacher outside lectures (e.g. during consultation), or discussing differences in the nature of the participation (general/specific) mediated through alternative instruments (oral/written/online). As a result, my experience of both remains largely anecdotal but both topics are material for future research.

A reinterpretation of the results using a large survey on Asian students

All the Asian students in my Finance course come from abroad and have been living in Australia for less than a year. Despite the possible ‘contamination’ from living in a foreign country, their stay in Australia seems relatively short for a likely dramatic change in their beliefs and approaches toward learning vis-à-vis studying in their home countries. As a result, I revisited the outcome of my teaching innovation with the data collected in a large student survey where respondents are predominantly local Asian students. The survey was carried out at the NUS by a team of NUS academics, the author, and the educational psychologist of the Centre for the Development of

Teaching and Learning (CDTL) of the university. The NUS survey aimed at collecting information on four major topics (motivation for undertaking higher education, perception of learning, effectiveness of teaching techniques, expectations about post-university life) and background information (including demographics, educational level of family members, cultural background, language) in order to relate aspects of learning with other dimensions of students' characteristics, experiences and expectations while at university.

A characteristic of the NUS survey is that many questions about the relative importance of the subject matter, as measured using a 5-point Likert scale, are followed by questions where a predetermined set of answers (including an open option) has to be ranked. For example, respondents had to select how comfortable they are with asking questions in class (1 = very much; 5 = not at all) prior to ranking various reasons for this in the subsequent question. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and data were collected from the 'NUS team's' classes as well as randomly across the NUS campus. Of the 1,316 surveys collected, which represent about 6% of NUS student population, 605 came from classes and the remaining 711 from random collection. No significant compositional differences arise from the two collection methods (for more information, see Tani, 2004).

Although the NUS survey did not exclusively cover student participation, respondents were asked about what factors stimulated their learning, their degree of comfort in asking questions in class, how they would like to be assessed, and the possible explanations behind their attitudes and beliefs toward in-class participation. The average rank or scale for these questions and the number of respondents (in parentheses) are reported in Table A in the Appendix.

The information from the NUS survey sheds some additional light on the relative success of the teaching innovation. First, data suggest that students acknowledge the contribution of one's direct participation to one's learning, even when participation is forced, as illustrated by the relatively high average ranking of the selection "my learning is most stimulated when I am encouraged (or forced) to ask questions in class" (second row from the top in Table A). Graduate students (as those enrolled in my course), appear to be on average more conscious of the link between participating and learning vis-à-vis undergraduate students, as indicated by the higher ranking of the participation answer. This result may help to explain the relative ease with which the Asian students in my classes accepted the teaching innovation discussed in this paper, and may be open to future innovations that could facilitate their learning.

Second, although the NUS data show that graduate students are fairly comfortable in asking questions during lectures (average value: 2.74), their disagreement with the statement "participation is unnecessary to enhance my learning process" (average rank: 1.36) is only marginally higher than their fear of participating (1.32). Graduates also have relatively strong views that participation is unnecessary to boost confidence to succeed at work (1.29) and to get good grades (1.19). Much clearer results emerge from the undergraduates, whose lack of participation appears to be largely driven by the fear of being wrong and the consequent loss of face, which are both consistent with the findings of the literature (e.g. Watson, 1999). These results suggest that the lack of participation from graduate classes may not be clearly attributed to one main cause, implying that teachers may find it harder to stimulate participation with a single tool. Among the instruments available, graduate students seem to better respond to those tools that stimulate discussion independently of any assessment. Over 40% of graduate students at NUS would like to see no marks for participation, relative to 20% among undergraduates. This might suggest that while undergraduate students may overcome the fear of participating with assessment, graduate students may be more self-motivated and hence happy to participate independently, without a system of reward and punishment. Participation in the question-writing time was anonymous, voluntary, regularly carried out and followed up with discussions, and was directed at enhancing learning. Notwithstanding the different circumstances surrounding graduate students at NUS and in my classes, the informality of the teaching innovation may be an additional reason behind its success.

Concluding remarks

The main lesson from introducing a question-writing time is that the silence of Asian students does not signal a fault of a teacher, but a difference that may be dealt with ad hoc techniques, such as the one presented in this paper. Facing a heterogeneous class requires teachers to be more patient than in the case of a class that is uniform, culturally, ideologically or otherwise, but it does not automatically lead to a loss in teaching effectiveness. Teaching and learning objectives can be maintained but they might be achieved through a number (as opposed to a single) communication and interaction routes. This may sound challenging, and labour intensive. However, it can also be inspirational. In my case for example, it made me embark on a research project with a lot of work attached to it, but also lots of fun!

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Michele Scoufis, Keiran Sharpe, Hwei-Fe'n Cheah, and two anonymous referees for helpful comments and suggestions. Financial assistance from the University of New South Wales (Faculty Research Grants program) is gratefully acknowledged. This paper has drawn on data collected at the National University of Singapore through a Universitas 21 and a Sir Anthony Mason Fellowships.

APPENDIX

Table A: NUS Survey: average ranking of answers to questions about participation

	Undergraduate (N = 1,169)	Graduate (N = 123)
(1) My learning is most stimulated when		
<i>I try to follow the example of my teacher, by repeating exercises</i>	3.06 (410)	1.89 (29)
<i>I am encouraged (or forced) to ask questions in lectures/classes</i>		
<i>I work with my peers</i>	3.02 (417)	2.10 (29)
<i>I am asked to research on my own about a topic</i>		
<i>The class asks questions during the lecture</i>	2.68 (477)	2.19 (31)
<i>I am entertained during the lecture</i>	2.70 (437)	2.05 (41)
<i>The teacher creates a friendly atmosphere</i>	3.06 (419)	2.24 (17)
<i>I work in class with my friends</i>	3.36 (377)	2.31 (26)
<i>Other</i>	2.47 (586)	2.38 (36)
	3.50 (417)	3.78 (9)
	2.20 (35)	1.00 (2)
(2) I feel comfortable in asking questions during a lecture	3.50 (1,152)	2.74 (123)
(3) I feel that asking questions during a lecture is		
<i>Rude</i>	2.15 (247)	3.40 (5)
<i>Too risky, as I would look stupid if I was wrong</i>	1.39 (484)	1.32 (25)
<i>Unnecessary to enhance my learning process</i>	2.12 (197)	1.36 (25)
<i>Unnecessary to build up confidence to succeed in my future career</i>	2.16 (183)	1.29 (14)
<i>Unnecessary to get better grades</i>		
<i>Other</i>	2.13 (231)	1.19 (26)
	-	-
(4) What proportion of assessment should be given to participation?	.1066 (1,128)	.0898 (115)

Notes:

The averages reported in Table A are based on ranking. Ranking range between 1 (highest) and 9 (lowest) in question (1), and between 1 and 6 in question (3), respectively.

The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of respondents on which the average ranking is calculated

Averages for question (2) are calculated on the basis of a Likert scale ranging from 1 (very much) to 5 (not at all)

Averages for question (4) represent percentages. The maximum value is 1, while the minimum is zero.

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