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The dynamics of student participation in classroom: observation on level and forms of participation

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Abstract

Effective learning process occurred when both teachers and students interact and participate in the learning activities. Participatory type of learning process will encourage mutual exchange of information’s; stimulate interest as well as recognition of respect among the teachers and students. This paper discusses the level of involvement and forms of involvement in three classrooms over a period of five (5) weeks contact hours. The observation was done on two undergraduate classrooms and one postgraduate classroom. The aim of observation is to identify the category of students in terms of active or passive involvement and the types of participation.

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1. Introduction

In any learning contexts, both educator and learner are the main actors. As a main actor, educators be it lecturers or teachers and learners, that is, students play complementing role in the process of learning. Lecturers have the responsibilities to teach, guide, motivate, facilitate and mould learners to become a useful, caliber and competent person. Learners, on the other hand should absorb, seek and apply the skill and knowledge shared in the classroom or other learning activities. These complementing engagements between lecturers and students do generate conducive learning environment.

Learning is a process which occurs in a social context and involved interaction between students and lecturers. Effective learning process occurred when both lecturers and students interact and actively participate in the learning activities. Nevertheless, as we often hear from the academic world, students still do not actively participate or become passive in the classroom despite encouragements and use of various teaching methods by the lectures to stimulate active participation from the students. The concern on the student participation leads this study to investigate the culture of student participation in the learning process. The objectives of the study are to identify forms and level of participation and to examine the factors influenced students to actively participate in classroom. This paper will reports on the forms and level of participation based on observation in the classrooms.

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2. Literature Review

Participation between lecturers and students is integral in the process of learning. There are several reasons why participation is important in the process of learning. Based on a study conducted by Ferguson-Hessler de Jong (in Theberge, 1994), it was found that students, who are active participants, tend to have better academic achievement, compared with students, who are passive in participation. This statement was supported by Astin (1999), claiming that students who are actively involved in the classroom discussions showed higher satisfaction in the learning process. Active participation of students with discussions in the classroom is important for the purpose of achieving effective learning and plays an important role in the success of education and personal development of students in the future (Tatar, 2005). This is because students will learn how to think critically and enhance their intellectual development if they are an active participant in the classroom (Siti Maziha, 2010).

The relationship between student participation in the classroom and students’ academic achievement is undeniable. Lahaderne (1967) observed that there are interactions between the process of teaching and academic achievement. Cobb (in Abu Bakar, 1986) found that there are linkages between the behaviors of children in the learning of mathematics with their academic achievement. Therefore, student participation is one of instructional components in the instruction enhanced by school to help students to learn more (Abu Bakar, 1986). A study conducted by Gomez, Arai & Lowe (1995) and Tsou (2005) showed that students participation in the classroom activities are essential for the purpose of creating effective learning.

Based on the literature and selected past researches, it can be concluded that student’s participation in the classroom will warrants the effectiveness of the learning process. What are the forms of student’s involvement in the classroom? According to Liu (2001), there are four forms of student involvement in the classroom, namely full integration, participation in the circumstances, marginal interaction, and silent observation. However, these patterns of participation are not static at all times and in every place (Liu, 2001). This is because there are student who may be actively participating in some discussion, but may be passive or become silent in another discussion (Zainal Abidin, 2007). In full integration, students engage actively in the class discussion, know what they want to say and what they should not say. Their participation in class is usually spontaneous, appropriate, and occurs naturally (Zainal Abidin, 2007).

Participation in the circumstances occurs when students influenced by factors such as socio-cultural, cognitive, affective, and linguistic or the environment and these often lead to student participation and interaction with other students and instructors become less. In addition, students will think carefully about what is the appropriate time for them to speak out their opinion for appropriate behavior during classroom discussion. They also show the reaction carefully to each discussion topic that they think is more difficult for them (Zainal Abidin, 2007).

In marginal interaction, students act more as listeners and less to speak out in the classroom. Unlike the students who are actively participate in the classroom discussions, this category of students prefer to listen and take notes than involved in the classroom discussion. Lastly, in silent observation, students tend to avoid oral participation in the classroom. They seem to accept whatever topic of discussion in the classroom. To help them to understand and ensure that what has been discussed in the classroom, students use various strategies, such as tape-recording, take notes or group discussions after lectures (Zainal Abidin, 2007).

In general, student participation in the classroom is through two communication behaviors, that is verbal and nonverbal (Lee, 2005). Verbal or oral participation refers to behaviors of speaking or giving opinions in the classroom, answering and asking questions or comments and taking part in the classroom discussions. Students who do not take the initiative to actively involved are usually considered as passive. In contrast, nonverbal participation is associated with behavioral responses during the class, including node their head, raise their hands, body movements and eye contact (Zainal Abidin, 2007).

3. Methodology

This study aims to investigate the culture of student participation in the learning process. The study was conducted on students of Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UKM. The research design employed in the study was observation on classrooms and focus group discussion. This paper discusses the findings from observation. Observation was done on three classes, namely two undergraduate classes at second year (Class 1) and third year (Class 2) respectively and one postgraduate class (Class 3). The purpose of observation is to identify the forms and level of participation and subsequently to identify the students in terms of active or passive participation.
in classroom for focus group discussion. Observation was done for a period of 5 weeks lectures. Their forms of participation are recorded throughout the lecture hours. Each observation was assisted by a Research Assistant (RA) who will record the behavior of the students.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Students Profile

In this study, Class 1, Year 2 undergraduate students has 39 students, followed by Year 3, 31 undergraduate students (Class 2) and 29 postgraduate students in Class 3. The total number of female students is 51 and male 48 students. Figure 1 showed the distribution of students in the three classrooms.

![Figure 1. Number of students by Year, Level of Study and Gender Students Participation](image)

4.2 Students Participation

Observation in classroom was carried out for the first-five weeks of lectures. Overall, the observation results showed that majority of students in Class 1 were passive throughout the five weeks. However, there are some students who are also involved in the active activities of learning. For Class 1, the most active weeks were in Week 1 and Week 3 with 14 and 20 times respectively students involved in the active participation. As for Class 2, the active weeks were in Week 3 and Week 5, with 40 and 44 times respectively students participate actively in the classroom. Most of the students are still involved in the passive form of participation such as listening to the lectures and taking notes. Observation on Class 3 (postgraduate students), showed that majority of the students is in the marginal interaction form of participation. They just listen and taking down notes. The students showed less frequency of active participation throughout the five weeks of observation. Figures 2, 3 and 4 indicate the frequency of participation by class throughout the observation weeks.

![Figure 2. Active and Passive Participation by Week](image)
4.3 Forms of Active and Passive Participation

Simply defined, participation in classroom is the acts of involvement in the class activities. In this research, the acts of involvement in class activities were operationally defined as active participation and passive participation. The act of active participation includes asking questions, give opinions and discuss about the related topic lectured. Passive participation refers to the acts of writing notes, sit quietly, listening to lectures or doing other things.

The result of the observation shows that the students in Class 1 are involved in various acts of active participation. They are quite active in giving opinions and discussing the topics. They show more confidence in giving opinion and also very convincing in discussing topics of the lectures. In the passive form of participation, students tend to listen to the lecture only (Figures 5 and 6).
Observation on Class 2 also revealed that students involved actively in giving opinion and asking questions. It is interesting to note that there are students who just sit quietly, just taking notes, listening to the lectures, using laptop or pretending to read. Figures 7 and 8 shows the acts of participation in Class 2.
Similarly, students in Class 3 (postgraduate students) are engaged in active participation such as discussing the topics, give opinion and asking questions. They also engaged in passive form of participation such as listening, sit quietly or doing other things. Figures 9 and 10 showed the forms of active and passive participations.
4.4 Students Participation by year/level of study

The data on observation in the three classrooms was also analyzed to examine the pattern on forms of student’s participation. In Class 1, the students are more inclined to be passive by just writing and listening to the lectures. However, in Class 2 the graph formed a bimodal curve with two maxima. Maxima one showed an active participation with students giving opinions and the other maxima with a passive participation by just writing and listening. Analysis by Class 3 for the postgraduate students also showed a bimodal curve. The two maxima that exist showed a passive form of participation, that is, sitting quietly and just listening to the lectures. The overall result of the analysis showed that the main form of students participation is listening, followed by writing notes. A few
students used laptop, text messaging or pretending to read books during discussion in the classroom (Figures 11, 12 and 13).

Figure 11. Forms of Students Participation by Class 1

Figure 12. Forms of Students Participation by Class 2
This study attempts to explore the culture of student participation in the classroom. The findings from the observation revealed some interesting results. Firstly, observation done on the three classrooms revealed that the students are not active participants. Based on the forms of participation by Liu (2001), the students can be categories as either participation in the circumstances, marginal interaction or silence observation. When they are in the classroom, they are more into listening and note-taking. Only some of the students in each classroom are involved in the active participation category such as asking questions, giving opinions or discussing the topics of the lecture.

Secondly, the study is important for researchers and lecturers to understand and identify the behavior of students in the classroom. The understanding on the student behavior in the classroom will help lecturers to plan and create a conducive learning environment whereby classroom activities will be more interactive and stimulating. Lecturers are encouraged to adopt various methods of active interactive teaching techniques such as problem-based learning and study group to stimulate active involvement from the students. Such pedagogical strategy will create a student centered and conducive learning environments. According to Davis (1993), conducive class environment encourage student participation, enthusiasm and willingness to learn and a participative environment in the classroom stimulates learning, sets the momentum and makes both the lecturer and student feel satisfied. Participative environment means not only a lot of questions and talking from the students, but it also means an environment where every student learned in a manner which best suits him or her. How to create a conducive environment? Lecturers must foster positive relationship with the students. Studies carried out in recent years have conclusively proven that the cordial and friendly relationship between students and teachers do generate the academic behavior.

5. Conclusion

Learning is an interactive process which involved active participation from both the lecturers and students in the classroom. An understanding on the behavior of the students in the classroom will help the lecturers identify the passive students and plan ways to encourage them to actively participate in the classroom. Both lecturers and students must actively engage in the classroom to create a more fun and meaningful learning experiences. The next step of this study will be to explore the reasons which may contribute towards the student tendency and willingness to participate in the classroom. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) will be carried out on the two set of students that is passive and active students from each classrooms.
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References