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# Student's participation in classroom: What motivates them to speak up?

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## Abstract

Students are encouraged to actively participate in classroom. Nevertheless, many of them are still reluctant to speak up. This paper discusses the reasons for students to speak up in the class. Discussion is based on focus group interviews conducted on three groups of active students and three groups of passive students identified through a five weeks observation on three classrooms at the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, The National University of Malaysia. The study found that the size of a classroom, personalities of the instructor and students and the perception of peers influenced the students to speak up in class.

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*Keywords:* active participation, passive participation, learning process, verbal engagement, learning environment.

## 1. Introduction

In any formal education, most of learning activities take place in a classroom. Classroom is a built-in environment where formal learning process takes place. It is an important context where both students and instructor come into contact to share information in their quest for knowledge. For the instructor, classroom time is a golden opportunity to meet face to face with the students, delivering the teaching material effectively with the aim to ensure that students are learning what is being taught. On the other hand, the students are expected to be presence on time and participate actively to 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 classroom environment.

A conducive classroom environment involved two-way interaction between students and instructors. This type of classroom environment will stimulate learning and makes both the instructor and students feel satisfied, which eventually leads to effective learning process. According to Wade (1994), most students can obtain the benefits such as the enjoyment of sharing ideas with others and learn more if they are active to contribute in class discussion. Effective learning process occurred when both instructors 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 instructors to stimulate active participation from the students. The concern on the students participation leads a study to investigate the culture of student participation in the learning process. The objectives of the study are to identify

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forms and level of participation and to examine the factors influenced students to actively participate in classroom. This paper highlights the reasons that motivate students to speak up in classroom. The discussion is based on the information gauged from the students during focus group interviews.

## 2. Literature Review

Simply defined, learning is acquiring new or modifying existing knowledge, skills or behaviours. Therefore, if learning is defined as quest for knowledge, skills or behaviours, then students need to be active in that quest. Students must be proactive to seek the knowledge by seeking as well as receiving information in an outside classroom. How the students seek and receive information are usually reflected in their behaviours in the classroom. The behaviours of students in classroom may range from passive to active participations. They may just sit quietly, taking notes, listening, doing something else, or asking questions, giving opinions, or answering questions posed (Mohd Yusof, et al 2011; Hussein, 2010; Bas, 2010). The first four is a passive type of behaviours while the latter is an active type of classroom behaviours.

Liu (2001) elaborated four types of student behaviours in the classroom as full integration, participation in the circumstances, marginal interaction, and silence observation. 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 and occurs naturally (Zainal Abidin 2007). Participation in the circumstances occurs when students influenced by factors, such as socio-cultural, cognitive, affective, linguistic, or the environment and these often lead to student participation and interaction with other students and instructors become less and speak only at appropriate time. In marginal interaction, students act more as listeners and less to speak out in the classroom. Unlike the students who 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 receive materials delivered in the classroom by taking notes using various strategies such as tape-recording or writing.

Based on the various types of classroom behaviours, to be an active learners, whenever in the classroom, students must engage actively by playing the roles of information seekers. The acts of asking questions, give opinions or simply answering questions posed by the instructor or fellow students are examples of active type of classroom participation. According to Davis (2009), student's enthusiasm and willingness to participate in a classroom through these verbal engagements will create a conducive classroom environment.

Past studies have shown that there are several factors influenced the student's participation in the process of learning. The first factor lies in the personality of the students. Students with high self efficacy showed better academic achievement and participating more in the classroom (Pajares, 1996 & Schunk, 1995). Self-efficacy trait with displaying more of that curiosity and exploring urge would motivate students to become more active and positive reciprocity (Rahil, Habibah, Loh, Muhd Fauzi, Nooreen, Maria Chong, 2006). Thus, if students' self efficacy is high, it will enhance their confident level to become more active and speak more in the classroom. They will show higher interest to learn more and know more with asking questions, giving opinions and discussing the topics in the classroom. Students can become passive in classroom discussion due to the self-limitations, such as cannot focus during lecture or learning time, fear of offense (Siti Maziha, Nik Suryani & Melor, 2010), low levels of self-confidence, do not make preparations before class, fear of failing to show their intelligence, fear that their answers will be criticized by the lecturers and the feelings of confusion, thus becoming less engaged in classroom discussions (Fassinger, 1995; Gomez, Arai & Lowe, 1995).

The second important factor that affects the students to participate actively in the classroom is the traits and skills of the instructor. Traits that have been shown by instructor, such as supportive, understanding, approachable, friendliness through positive nonverbal behaviour, giving smiles and nodded for admitting the answers that are given by students (Siti Maziha, Nik Suryani & Melor, 2010), affirmative and open-mindedness (Dallimore, Hertenstein & Platt, 2004; Fassinger, 1995; 2000) also contributed to the students active participation in the

classroom. These positive traits give a motivational effect on students to actively participate in classroom. A study conducted by Siti Maziha, Nik Suryani & Melor (2010) which aims to examine the influence of factors that make the participation of undergraduate students in Malaysia found that the traits shown by instructors play an important role in providing incentives for students to participate in class discussions.

Apart from the positive qualities shown by instructor to encourage active students participation in classroom discussion, the skills of the instructor may also affect the classroom environment. For example, a study by Nurzatulshima, Lilia, Kamisah & T Subahan (2009) on three experienced science teachers through observation in classroom, interview with students and analysis of students' documents for the purpose to explore the way teachers managing their students in order to increase their participation in science practical work showed that student participation in science practical class is high when the teacher divided the students into three to five in a group and delegating the work, patrolling and checking the students' progress during practical session, giving out positive rewards and friendly cooperation from lab assistant in monitoring students. The variety of teaching techniques employed by the teachers will encourage the students to be more active, not feel bored or depressed during the class.

Another important factor that influenced the students to speak up in class is the perception of classmates. One important finding from the study by Siti Maziha, Nik Suryani & Melor (2010) on undergraduate students in the classroom of a university in Malaysia found that the traits shown by peers or classmates play an important role in providing incentives for students to participate in class discussions. Besides that, Cayanus & Martin (2004) found that students who are open-mindedness, give a motivational effect on other students to actively participate in class.

Environmental factor such as the size of classroom also affect the motivation of students to engage verbally in classroom. A study conducted by Shaheen, Cheng, Audrey & Lim (2010) aims to explore the perceptions of 172 postgraduate students from three graduate programmes in the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication & information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore found that 90% of students felt that they prefer to participate in discussions in small group as compared with in bigger classroom. A classroom equipped with proper lights, fan or air conditioning, and other basic facilities will make students to feel comfortable and may encourage them to participate in the learning activities.

Based on these selected past studies and literature, it can be conclusively proven that being active in classroom discussion will make the students to learn more. However, the instructor and the education provider must take into consideration the factors that stimulate or hinders the students to be active learners in the classroom.

### **3. Methodology**

This study aims to investigate the culture of student participation in the learning process. The focus of the study is on the issue of students' involvement in the classroom. The study was conducted on students of Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, at the National University of Malaysia. The research design employed in the study was observation on classrooms and focus group discussion or FGD. 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 number of students in each class are 39, 31, and 29 respectively. The purpose of observation is to identify the forms and level of participation and subsequently to categorized students from those classrooms for focus group discussion. Observation was done for a period of 5 weeks lectures. Their forms and frequency of participation are recorded throughout the lecture hours.

The focus group discussions were then conducted on six groups of students, comprising three groups each of active and passive students from the three classes. Active and passive students were identified by their number of participations in the classroom throughout the five weeks observation. Each group comprised of six students. Each of the discussions lasted for between one to two hours. The students are asked questions on the factors that motivate them to speak up or not to speak in the classroom. The discussions were led by the researchers and recorded.

## 4. Findings And Discussion

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) sessions were conducted for one to two hours for each group of active and passive students. Aspects discussed in FGD are related to personality and traits of instructors, students and peers, culture and environment. These variables were selected with reference to some past studies which showed that all of these aspects were related to the participation of students in classroom.

### 4.1 Personality factor

In group one (Year 2 undergraduates), the students highlighted responsibility as part of personality that motivates them to speak. They feel that it is the responsibility of the students to ask if they do not understand, want to know or need further clarifications from the instructor. Students in group two (Year 3 undergraduates), mentioned the personalities such as like to read, like to ask to friends or instructors, prepared before entering the class and have a high curiosity attitude that drive them to speak up in classroom. While students in group three (postgraduates), cited personality traits include make early preparations, like to talk and asking questions, like to read, and loves to get attention in class. Generally, students who have the characteristics of responsibility, like to read, high curiosity, always be prepared, and like to ask questions will form an active personality. These traits will facilitate the formation of self efficacy, as stated by Rahil et.al (2006), with a high degree of self efficacy and thus will increase confidence level and motivate them to speak up in classroom. Personality traits of passive students were found to be opposite to the active students and it distinguishes the degree of participation in classroom. The personality characteristics of passive students for the first group is that, they afraid to ask and the fear getting scolded by instructor. They are also not confident with their selves and just sit still and listened.

For the second group, the personality of passive students is that, they are difficult to focus in class, no interest in learning, no interest in the topic being studied, was ashamed to ask, lack of knowledge, and not confident with themselves. Students prefer to ask in person with a lecturer or do some reference from the Internet if they do not understand or want to seek more information. Furthermore, for the third group, the personalities of passive students are more into listening, do not like reading books and talking only when necessary.

Generally, for these three passive groups of students, they had little knowledge of the topic being taught because they do not like to read or no interest in the topic. These traits caused them to feel no confident with their selves and ashamed to ask. This shows that the characteristics of low self-efficacy will cause them to be passive in the classroom. These findings are consistent with Fassinger (1995) and Gomez et.al (1995), that low levels of self-confidence, do not make preparation before class, fear of failing to show their intelligence while in the classroom and the feelings of confusion, will cause students to become passive, thus becoming less engaged in classroom discussions. This is also supported by Siti Mazihah et.al (2010), who found that students become passive in classroom discussion due to the self-limitations, such as cannot focus during lecture or learning time and fear of offense.

Passive students also come from different cultural backgrounds. For group one, students who are less vulnerable to knowledge, less reading and not ready before entering the class will lead them to become passive. They do not know what to ask and would rather sit and writing notes. Possibly, this attitude has been embedded since childhood through family socialization. One of the passive students said that he did not like to ask since childhood. If there are things that are not understood, he would rather ask a friend to ask the question on his behalf. There are also among those who are not skilled with the language used in the classroom. To not laugh at by others, they prefer to keep quiet and just listen.

### 4.2 Environmental factor

The elements that associated with this factor such as size of a classroom, seating positions in class, condition of classroom, lecture time and the use of technology were asked to the students during FGD. The group of active

students provides a different view on the influence of size of classroom on participation in classroom. Some are concerned about size and choose a small size as a conducive environment for learning. With the small size of classroom, students feel not ashamed to ask and instructors are able to focus more on the students. However, there are students who are not so concerned with the size because big or small, they will ask questions to get more information.

The finding indicates that seating positions in the classroom does not affect student participation. Whether sitting in front or at the back, these active students still participate actively. Lecture time, however, is important and can influence participation. Students who attend classes in the evenings usually feel tired and this may reduce their interest to actively involved in the classroom.

Overall, among the active students, environmental factors such as size of classroom and seating positions in the class, are not so clearly affect their participation. For those who are extrovert, environmental elements do not significantly affect their willingness to ask questions and giving opinions. For passive students, the views expressed by this group are different from active students. Passive students in group 1 said they are more comfortable with smaller class. This could be related to their introvert personality. They do not like to be in big audiences and difficult to assimilate themselves with bigger crowd compared to active students.

Similarly, the second group also prefers small class size and seating position in the front row. In their view, these two elements can influence active participation in classroom. For group 3, the views given by the students in this matter are mixed. They are more comfortable sitting in the front and some do not mind sitting at the back. Respondents who choose to sit at the back claimed that this seating position will facilitate them to ask a friend if they do not understand the topic being studied. Overall, the size of a classroom and seating positions in classroom are important to encourage passive students to be active in class. This accorded with their personality traits which are quiet, shy, fearful and less confident.

#### **4.3 The influence of instructor in classroom**

The study found that both passive and active students agreed that instructors play a major factor in any classrooms. Positive traits of instructors and the method or style of teaching employed are important motivating factors to stimulate verbal engagements among students in the classroom. An instructor's traits that favored by students are friendly, know each student well, do not criticize the students, always show a good mood, and approachable. With these traits, students do not feel afraid and ashamed to speak up in class. Students also do not feel left out when everyone is given equal opportunity to participate. Preferred teaching methods to encourage students to participate actively in classroom are provide notes before the class start, so that they can prepare before coming to the class, conducting activities in the classroom, and always inviting students to speak in a Q & A session.

In conclusion, the instructors' traits chosen by both passive and active students are friendly, openness, professional, and able to know the students well. A skilled instructors will employed the best method or style that will stimulate students to be responsive, not bored and idleness in the classroom.

#### **4.4 The influence of classmates or peers**

Classmates may also influence the learning process. Fassinger (1995), refers peers as a class trait and categorized them into two, firstly interaction norms (pressure from peers not to speak, the pressure to keep comments brief, peer discouragement of controversial opinions, peers' attention, and peers' lack of respect), and secondly, emotional climate (friendships, students' supports of each other, and students' cooperation). FGD results for the first active group found that classmates influenced students to be active in classroom. Passive students usually will ask active students to ask questions on their behalf. Active students preferred to sit with their counterparts, so that they can be as active in in the class.

Similar to group 1, group 2 and 3 of active students also said that classmate did influence them to be active in class. Active students will be asked to be an intermediary for other students to ask questions. More active students in class is better because they will be competing to seek knowledge through discussion and participation in classroom. FGD results of the first group of passive students, found that students' perceptions of peer influence on their learning is mostly negative. They do not perceived an active classmates inspire them to learn, but rather just wanted to show off. They considered the domination of active students in talking causing them to feel marginalized and inferior, thus they choose to be passive in the classroom.

For group 3, the views on the influence of peers was mixed. Some agreed that classmates do encourage them to ask questions. For students who do not agree, the reason is that they have not yet know their classmates well. For those who agreed, they considered active classmates as spoke persons to ask questions particularly from the matured students, who are more knowledgeable and experienced. Thus, the passive students will depend on active students to get more information.

In conclusion, the students agreed on the importance of peers in the learning process. However, students prefer to be in a group similar to them in term of assertiveness in classroom. Overall, both groups of passive and active students acknowledged the importance of students to speak up in the class. Thus, it is important for the instructor to create a conducive learning environment which will stimulate the students to actively participate in the classroom. Behaviours of students in classroom can be categorized as active and passive. While there are students who actively participate in classroom and yet there are many more who hesitate to participate. Being inactive or passive in class is one way to show that the students are not able to express themselves. Students who always participate in class are the ones that are easily remembered by their lecturers. Therefore, it is important for the instructors to encourage all students to speak up because speaking is one important way for students to learn more in the learning process.

In an effort to encourage all students to speak up, the instructors can take several steps such as;

1. Invite the students to speak up
2. Affirming or valued their contributions matter
3. Give marks/grade for every active participation
4. Be skillful in varieties of teaching techniques
5. Reinforce that it is ok to speak up regardless of what is said to be true or not
6. Be approachable and friendly

All these steps are ways towards creating a conducive classroom environment. Its aims are to transform the classroom into a full integration type of participation whereby majority of the students engaged actively in the classroom activities.

## **5. Conclusion**

Identifying the factors for purpose of knowing the reasons that motivate the students to speak up in classroom is beneficial to the instructors in managing their classrooms. The study has revealed useful insights as to what motivate students to speak up in classroom. With this understanding, the instructors can plan strategies and employ proper techniques to create a responsive classroom. It is believed that classrooms are richest when all voices are heard. In a situation where students are less active or passive in the classroom, it is pertinent for the instructors to encourage active involvement. Thus, it is paramount for the instructor to create a conducive learning environment which will stimulate the students to be actively involved in the classroom.

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