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Perceptions towards Classroom Participation: A Case Study of Malaysian Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

This paper aims to document perceptions that shape undergraduate students’ participation in Malaysian classrooms. On particular, it aims to discover students’ perception of classroom participation and how their perceptions impact their actual participation. Interviews and observations were carried out on a sample of 85 students from two communication classes. Results show that the multitude of views that students have on classroom participation signifies the unseen complex direct or indirect influence that impact their classroom participation patterns. Recommendations are offered to educators in formulating future teaching strategies that recognize students’ unique characteristics and promote open, supportive environment.

Keywords: Perceptions of participation; Actual participation; Undergraduate students, Direct and indirect influences, Teaching strategies

1. Introduction

The definitions of participation within the literature have been found to be commonly associated specific behaviors like with asking or answering questions. Fassinger (1995) sees participation as “any comments or questions that the students offered or raised in class” (p. 27). Bippus and Young (2000) defined participation as participating in class discussion, and refraining from negative behaviors. Petress (2006) operationally defined participation as consisting of three evaluative dimensions which are quantity, dependability, and quality. Petress explained that quantity refers to the opportunities given to students to participate constructively. Dependability refers to having students who can be relied upon to contribute ‘relevantly, clearly and respectfully’ when called upon in class (p.3). Quality class participation refers to students showing evidence of personal awareness of concepts discussed in class and this requires some interaction frequency. Dallimore, Hertenstein and Platt (2004), stressed that there are differences in the way faculty and students define participation. Students see participation as a variety of non-oral participation behaviours whereas faculty defines participation as oral.

Crombie, Pyke, Silverthorn, Jones and Piccinin (2003) investigated the perceptions of the overall amount, the form of student participation, and students’ general activity level in a study involving 542 undergraduate students from a Canadian university. From the ANCOVA analyses, they found that students categorized as active class
participants perceived themselves to raise their hands more frequently, interrupt more frequently, and intervene for longer periods of time as compared to those categorized as less active. This means that active students participate more frequently and speak for a longer period of time in comparison to the less active students.

Most students according to Wade (1994) recognized the benefits of contributing to class discussion which include the joy of sharing ideas and contributing to class discussion and the belief that they learn more by participating. In contrary to students’ recognition of the benefits of participation, 60% of them stated that it is a matter of personal choice to contribute to class discussion, and only 56% believed that they have the responsibility to contribute occasionally. A significant correlation was found between the value of participating and act of participating and enjoyment of participating.

Active classroom participation played an important role in the success of education and students’ personal development in the future (Tatar, 2005). Students, who are actively involved, reported higher satisfaction and higher persistence rates (Astin, 1999). Although there have been numerous studies on classroom participation, only 28.9% of the studies involved higher education. Thus, there is a lacking in the literature that searched for evidence in university classrooms and from the perspective of students themselves. Tatar (2005) commented that only few studies have investigated classroom participation from the perspective of students or attempted to discover the reasons why some students don’t participate even when participation is encouraged. Many previous studies have taken the instructor’s perspective, rather than college-aged students. Exploring classroom participation from students’ perspective is important because it provides a firsthand account and insight into their perceptions and these perceptions are their own realities in experiencing classroom participation.

Classroom participation in Malaysia has only been investigated by a few researchers. Liew (2009) investigated factors affecting second language learners’ classroom participation. The study focuses mainly on the second language learning. Zainal Abidin (2007) carried out an investigation into Malaysian students’ oral classroom participation with the participants being 146 first year Engineering students. Due to the scant literature on classroom participation in Malaysia, this study is timely and aims to shed lights on Malaysian students’ perception of classroom participation.

2. Research questions

The purposes of the study are to explore the undergraduate students’ perceptions regarding classroom participation and how their perceptions shape their participation classrooms through the following research questions:

1. What are students’ perceptions of classroom participation and their perceived value of participation?
2. How do their perceptions impact their actual participation?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The study was conducted at a medium-sized private university in Kuala Lumpur. The participants were undergraduate students pursuing communication courses. The courses were selected because they require a high level of student participation and focus more on oral communication activities rather than writing skills. Two intact classes of 84 students were selected to provide a heterogeneous population regarding age, gender, background, and race. The participants were all Malaysian students with similar education backgrounds and expressed agreement to take part in the study.

3.2 Data Collection

During the first stage of the study, in-depth interviews were carried out with open-ended questions and as few prompts as possible to elicit rich descriptions of experiences. 25 participants, 10 male and 15 female were selected from the two classes. The participants for the interview were carefully selected using maximum variation sampling. The purpose of using this kind of sampling was to document unique or diverse variations in order to identify important communication patterns that cut across variations. They were asked about their personal experiences in classroom participation and the ways they participate in class. For example, participants were asked ‘How would
you define classroom participation and non-participation?’ and ‘Do you think classroom participation is important? Why?’ Each interview lasted for approximately 20 minutes.

In the second stage, the observations were conducted during the third through tenth week of a fourteen-week semester. Observations were carried out by observing all potentially relevant occurrences of participation behaviors of students. The non-participant observation was appropriate because the observer remained inconspicuous so that the behavior of the participants was not affected. Field-note-taking and video tape recordings were also allowed during the observations in the two classes. 120 minutes from each session was recorded on video.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data from the interviews were transcribed verbatim and data from the observation were coded. Recurring patterns exhibited and reported by the students were identified through reading and re-reading the data and listening to and watching the taped sessions. The final categories were derived from the identification of similar themes from multiple participants. The emerging patterns were revealed and they were basically categories of behavior that reflect students’ perception of classroom participation.

4. Results

4.1 Students’ perception of classroom participation

To explore the particular way students viewed class participation, they were asked about how they define classroom participation. The definitions given by the students could be categorized into two major areas; communication between lecturer and students and being committed.

4.1.1 Communication between Lecturer and Students

Asking and answering questions: Sixteen participants mentioned that they perceived classroom participation as students asking questions to the lecturer and the other way around. In response to the questions asked, there will be answers from both students and lecturer. For example:

“To me, of course, when the students answer questions.. when students ask questions to the lecturers, so I think the students participate in class” (Interviewee 1),

“Asking questions and volunteering to answer questions are normal ways for us to participate in class.” (Interviewee 13)

Sharing of ideas, opinions, experiences, jokes and stories: Seven of the participants talked about how they have shared ideas, opinions, experiences and stories with the lecturer and their classmates as their ways of being participative in class. Examples included:

“Sharing stories and giving opinions are also participation.” (Interviewee 12),

“I also participate by sharing ideas about what is not in the textbooks!” (Interviewee 14) and

“I think it is sharing of ideas and experiences…not just between lecturer and students…also between student and student.” (Interviewee 15)

Two participants explained that to them telling jokes is a way to for them to participate. They said:

“Cracking jokes is a good way to participate…I do it often…it makes everyone happy to learn!”(Interviewee 15) and

“I also think that telling jokes is a way to participate. I like it when my classmate tells a joke about what we are learning in class…less stress…more laughter!” (Interviewee 12)
Interacting with lecturer and other students in class: Three of the participants saw participation as interaction between them, the lecturer and their classmates during class hours. They mentioned:

“Ah, for me, it’s like, you know, students interact with the lecturer or classmates about what is discussed in class…and…communication between students and lecturers” (Interviewee 7),

“I think participation is taking part in class activities, listening to the lecturer, making eye-contact, and learning by observing….interacting with my friends, asking questions and ignoring noises made by other students.” (Interviewee 10),

“I think when I interact with my lecturer or classmates, I am participating coz I am involved in the learning!” (Interviewee 17)

Responding non-verbally: Two participants mentioned that participation can be more than verbal interaction. It also means responding to lecturer using non-verbal signals. For example:

“Sometimes, I participate…I clap my hands, I nodd my head when I understand..I laugh when my lecturer tells a joke…I think that is ok..at least I respond!” (Interviewee 4)

“… and shaking my head, nodding, clapping my hands...important coz I am responding to the lecturer…at least she knows, I am concentrating…” (Interviewee 12)

4.1.2 Being Committed

Being fully involved: When students are present in class, physically and mentally, they are seen as being participative. Three participants described being fully committed as attending class and being present mentally. This means that to them, students need to attend class and be involved in the activities happening in class. The participants said:

“I think being present physically and mentally in class shows that I am fully committed…so I am actively participating. I don’t think it is enough for me to just sit there….I must listen, process the knowledge, apply and give feedback…”(Interviewee 11),

“Of course, being present physically and mentally in class can be considered as participation…. I think!” (Interviewee 12) and

“Getting fully involved in class activities….like you are there in class and not thinking of other things…you know what I mean! You give your 100% to the class!” (Interviewee 13).

Completing tasks given: Carrying out and completing tasks given to them by the lecturer is seen as participation by two of the participants. They said:

“My opinion is... being involved in certain activities in class, if, uh, students are given an activity or any task...they must do or volunteer to do. So, I think that's the definition.” (Interviewee 6) and

“.. do things like finishing the task given, or get all the activities done before class finishes.” (Interviewee 9)

From the definitions given, it can be summarized that students see participation as being involved in the class activities. This involvement was construed by the students in two ways: firstly, interacting with the lecturer and other students in class by listening and responding non-verbally to others, active solicited or unsolicited contributions, such as asking questions, answering questions, sharing ideas, opinions, experiences, jokes and stories comments and discussing about a topic or participating in group activities. Secondly, being fully involved in the
class activities by focusing, listening and showing interest in what goes on in class, completing tasks assigned in the required time.

With a view of enhancing understanding of the students’ perception of classroom participation, the study probes deeper by getting students’ insights about what they perceive as non-participation. Such insights are seldom discussed and rarely analyzed. However, they offer an important contribution to research on classroom interaction and teaching.

Students perceived non-participation as not being committed. This includes not being involved, not paying attention and doing other unrelated activities. 20 of the students mentioned a multitude of behaviors that can be categorized at not being involved. They reported that:

“Non-participation happens when students are being inactive and quiet and not interested in the classroom activities.” (Interviewee 22),

“The students silently sit away from the rest of the class or in one corner,…(Interviewee 23) and

“Non-participation is basically not participating in anything. Most probably because she is not interested in the classmates or even the lecturer. Or maybe their personality is like that, they prefer to be alone and not interested to join others.” (Interviewee 25)

10 students reported that not listening or focusing on what goes on in class as non-participation. They said:

“I see ‘non-participation’ as students not paying attention to the lecturer’s lecture.” (Interviewee 18),

“They don’t pay attention to what is happening in class. … This attitude will bring problems so they should change this attitude for their future.” (Interviewee 19)

“Students are not paying attention or not interested in the class...I feel that these students might not get the knowledge or message from the lecturer.” (Interviewee 20)

“Sometimes students don’t listen to anything.” (Interviewee24)

Doing other unrelated activities: 5 students mentioned doing other things in class as non-participation. They reported:

“It is like when students do other things not related…nothing to do with what is discussed in class…for example checking sms, drawing, chatting with friends.” (Interviewee 17),

“I can see them sending text messages, gossiping or perhaps sleeping or daydreaming in class… (Interviewee 18),

“…do one’s business which has nothing to do with the subject,” (Interviewee 23) and

“They talk, send mails and play games using the phone” (Interviewee 24).

Having poor attitude towards studies was also mentioned as a form of non-participation. A few students described not finishing the tasks given by the lecturer as non-participation. Two of them said:

“…and they don’t finish the task given.” (Interviewee 6)

“Also do things like finishing the task given, or get all the activities done before class finishes.” (Interviewee 9)
Some students exhibited poor attitude as they came to class late or missed classes altogether. This was considered as non-participation as described by a student: “For some students they like to come late to class or sometimes they don’t come.” (Interviewee 24). The participants showed understanding of what constitutes non-participation. Their description of non-participation was basically the opposite of their description of participation. The two major behavior patterns perceived by them to be ‘non-participation’ were not being committed and having poor attitude towards studies.

The students’ perceived value of participation was also investigated. It was found that all the students interviewed recognized the importance of participating in class activities. They felt that participation is important and they mentioned how they benefitted from their participation in class activities. The students gave three main benefits they gained from their class participation. The first benefit mentioned was improvement in their academic achievement. The students felt that by participating in class activities, they would learn more and understand better what was being taught in class. For example two students said:

“Very important. Because when students are actively involved, they remember more and understand better! (Interviewee 25)

The students also believed that by participating, they exchanged ideas with their lecturers and classmates that opened their mind to new perspectives. They said:

“Yes because by participating we get more knowledge, we can share ideas, brainstorm, and tighten relationship between lecturer and students!” (Interviewee 17) and

“Yes because students learn more when they are active in class. Through participation, we learn more on the subject, we communicate with our lecturer and classmates...we interact more...we learn from one another!” (Interviewee 18)

Some students felt that their participation helped them to learn better that consequently helped them to do better academically. This is explained by these students:

“Participation is important...When students participate, they remember more! Many things we discuss in class come out in finals!” (Interviewee 13) and

“I think participation is essential. When I participate, I think more. I look at things critically. When I think more, I understand more. When I understand more, I do better in exams!” (Interviewee 16)

The second benefit was they gain confidence when they participate in class activities. The students commented that they improved their confidence in communicating in class by participating in class activities. When they asked questions, provided answers, and shared opinions, they got the opportunity to practice their speaking skills and eventually they would feel less awkward in voicing their opinion. For instance, they explained:

“Participation is a necessity... I feel that students can practice their pronunciation by trying to speak in class...soon they will feel more confident, I think!” (Interviewee 14) and
“I think participation helps students to be more confident in voicing their thoughts in class, practice speaking in front of classmates...they may be a bit shy at first...but they’ll be ok after a while. It is actually fun to participate once you get used to it.” (Interviewee 12)

The third benefit was they improve thinking abilities. Active class activities often require students to think on their feet. They believed that they could improve their thinking abilities by participating, thus helped them to get better grades. The following comments provided clear examples:

“I think participation is essential. When I participate, I think more. I look at things critically. When I think more, I understand more. When I understand more, I do better in exams.” (Interviewee 16) and

“Yes, participation is necessary. Because it shows a student’s concentration, it tests his thinking skills and his understanding of the subject.” (Interviewee 20)

Classroom participation has been recognized as important by the students interviewed. They were of opinion that their participation in class activities has helped them to gain knowledge and confidence, and improve their thinking abilities.

Interesting observations were made by a few of the students interviewed. They said that they participated because they were communication students and therefore, they were supposed to be good at communicating with others in or outside the classroom. Their perceptions were that they had the responsibility to participate because of their choice of major. Three of them said:

“When I chose to study communication, I know that I have to be active...get involved in class activities and also outside...I must be good at communicating coz if not I can’t get good marks! So, I try and try. I was not that good at first. I think now I am better and I can speak more in class.” (Interviewee 20)

“I attend communication classes every day. I understand that when I enroll in a communication program that I have to be an active communicator. I think even the lecturers expect us to talk more in class. I do my best to participate in the activities.” (Interviewee 16) and

“I think I am an active student. I chose communication major coz I know it suits me. I like to share my opinions and participate in class activities. I wouldn’t miss the chance to participate.” (Interviewee 7)

From the observations carried out, it was evident that students, who believe that participation is about letting their voices be heard, exhibited inclination to participate by sharing their opinions or ideas. They were also more prone to try to answer questions and did not seem to mind making mistakes. In contrast students, who perceived non-verbal communication as a way to participate, most of the time used their non-verbal responses by clapping their hands or nodding their heads. Students who reported that they placed a great value on classroom participation because they believe that their participation in class activities helps them to gain knowledge and confidence, and improve their thinking abilities exhibited concentrated efforts in being participative. They remained focused and were consistently active throughout the semester. Interestingly, many of the students expressed understanding that by choosing a communication major, they were expected to be active in class activities and be able to speak out. Being active was also seen by the students as part of the course requirement so they did put a lot of efforts to be participative.

The observations also revealed that some students participated minimally. Minimal participation patterns were exhibited by students who participated just enough to create what they perceived as a positive impression. They did so by responding using short answers. When asked about their minimal participation, they responded that they perceived participation as being present in class and showing respect to lecturers by listening and being silent. Thus, according to them, they chose to be quiet and only answered when they were directly asked by the lecturer.
5. Discussion and conclusion

Classroom participation was construed by students in two ways: firstly, communicating with the lecturer and other students in class by listening and responding non-verbally to others, active solicited or unsolicited contributions, such as asking questions, answering questions, sharing ideas, opinions, experiences, jokes and stories comments and discussing about a topic or participating in group activities. Secondly, being fully involved in the class activities by attending class, focusing, listening and showing interest in what goes on in class, completing tasks assigned in the required time.

This multitude of views on classroom participation signifies the unseen complexity of how students perceive classroom participation that directly or indirectly influence their classroom participation patterns. It is interesting to note that students consider responding non-verbally to lecturers as important because it shows that they are paying attention. They see non-verbal responses as a form of classroom participation. This finding supports the study carried out by Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt (2004), which found that students define participation as a variety of non-oral participation behaviors.

Students also reported that they placed a great value on classroom participation because they believe that their participation in class activities helps them to gain knowledge and confidence, and improve their thinking abilities. The values that they hold would affect how much effort they put into being participative in class. This finding is consistent with the findings from the study done by Wade (1994).

The observation data showed that students’ perceptions towards participation coincided with how they participated in class, for instance: students who reported that participation is about being involved physically and mentally in class activities exhibited relaxed and open demeanors while participating in class. They were also active in class. Those who felt that participation was about being physically present in class were less active, more often spectators and refrained from participating.

Importantly, the observations revealed that some students actively participate in the classroom through means of oral engagement, while others remain silent. This finding is consistent with the finding studies carried out by Meyer (2007) and Meyer and Hunt (2004). Some students claimed them they chose not to participate as they felt that she learned more by listening and keeping quiet. This silence for cognitive processing is difficult to identify but during observations, silent pauses which were likely to be due to cognitive processing occurred among students.

Students’ view that they could be cognitively engaged while being silent could be taken into consideration by educators as silence is valued and expected in Malaysian culture. Thus, it would be wise for instructors to recognize participation is a broader concept than mere speech and consider putting importance on both participation and silence because they have their roles in classroom learning.

Students’ perceptions of classroom participation appear to influence their participative behavior to some extent. Educators need to recognize this so they can adopt strategies that influence students’ perceptions positively so the students can be more participative, yet find a healthy mix of talk and silence during class sessions. The right balance of both behaviors in promoting students’ intellectual engagement in classroom learning is worth pursuing and warrants further investigation. Educators also could design class activities that promote open and supportive environment so students are able to participate vocally or in alternative ways.

References


