THE SOUND OF SILENCE: THE BARRIERS ON STUDENTS' ORAL PARTICIPATION IN THE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

There are many reasons to believe that classroom interaction or students' oral participation in class is a necessity and beneficial for learners. However, getting students to respond is not always the situation in many classes. In Quirino State University, oral participation is one of the problems that most teachers face. The qualitative inquiry method was used. Data were collected through individual interviews, focus group discussion, classroom observations, and relevant document used in this study. Narrative analysis was utilized and purposeful sampling technique was used. Data were analyzed using Hyper Research. The findings suggest that the participants' classroom participation experiences were influenced by multiple factors, the major ones include inferiority complex, social phobia or fear, period of adjustment, no self-esteem and not customary to speak in class. With these findings, the researcher recommends, student-centered approach, provide friendly classroom, use innovative teaching strategies, ensure that all students have equitable opportunities to learn and to perform to a standard, and help students acquire social skills needed to interact effectively.

Keywords: *Silence, Barriers, Oral Participation*

INTRODUCTION

This research discusses the sound of silence: the barriers on students' oral participation in the classroom.

In the world today, global education aims to educate all people to a certain world of standards. It prepares today's youth around the world to function in one world environment. Furthermore, formal education at all levels, faces the great challenge of preparing students for the forthcoming era of a new revolution.

United Nations set a global standard for education; global education requires the skills for 21st century so that all will be ready to play a significant role to provide educational access to all types of learners all over the world. Moreover, preparing the learner in an international marketplace with a world view of international understanding. Thus, to meet the challenges, 21st century skills have been established such as skills in communication.

According to the dictionary, barrier is anything that prevents people from being together or understanding each other. Oral participation is generally highly valued in classrooms and is often thought to be a good indicator of students' engagement in learning. As a result, many college instructors require and/or grade oral participation.

Also, oral participation in the target language is beneficial for classroom language learners. Teachers often view oral participation as a measure of learner involvement. Thus, learners who participate often are likely to make greater proficiency gains.

On the other hand, (K. Erath, 2018) revealed that teacher moves that have been identified as facilitating students' participation in explanations and the corresponding epistemic processes.

Moreover, participation in class discussion, or oral participation, consisted of students' participation in classroom speech activities without being called on, such as expressing opinions, making recommendations, and asking questions (Mori, 2000). Likewise, it is commonly perceived as students' verbal activity that 'fits into a routine or a teacher-established pattern of classroom discourse' (Schultz, 2009) in which silence is rarely seen as a contribution to classroom work.

In contrary to this, to explain why despite technology that permits bi-directional oral communication during televised instruction, learner participation was poor (R. Evans, 2005). Furthermore, speaking in front of people and presenting ideas and/or persuading others can be a daunting experience and the anxiety related to these circumstances could increase if one has to deliver a speech or discuss ideas with others in a language different from one's mother tongue. This anxiety often affects speakers' achievement and is viewed as a negative factor in communication (Horwitz, 2001). However, it is crucial to continuously communicate with others as social beings and many times this expands to talking to and discussing with people one does not know well. At a time like this, unfortunately, Asian students are still widely perceived as being passive communicators especially in classroom

contexts (Loh & Teo, 2017; Kember, 2009; Exley, 2005; Cheng, 2000). These groups of students are deemed largely as shy people who are unwilling to participate in class discussion or share their opinions and ask questions (Loh & Teo, 2017; Tran, 2013).

In classroom setting, one of the problems encountered by a teacher to his/her students is oral participation. This study further explored the barriers on students oral participation in the classroom in Quirino State University Main Campus.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Factors that Drive Reticence in Classroom Participation

Factors hindering students from verbally participating in class could be a multifaceted issue with various elements involved including individual and situational causes such as language proficiency level, social context, anxiety, motivation, cognitive conditions, gender and age (Shao & Gao, 2016; Cao, 2011; Ellis, 2008; Cao & Philp, 2006). Several studies suggest that students' unwillingness to verbally communicate in class is largely due to their foreign language anxiety, a major reason behind their shyness (Chun, 2014; Lee, 2009; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Liu, 2006). Though these studies provide insights on certain positive and negative effects of using foreign languages in classroom, most of the studies were based on English language classrooms focusing on learning the language. Another factor that is perceived to drive communication apprehension, especially concerning oral participation, is cultural norms (Wu, 2015). especially in hierarchical societies where constant monitoring of performance tied to collective success affect learners' and workers' fear of negative evaluation by others (Saad, Cleveland, & Ho, 2015; Oh et al., 2014; King, McInerney, & Watkins, 2013; Lee, 2009). This in turn can lead to minimal verbal interaction. (Liu and Jackson, 2008) assert that this is particularly the case with Asian students whose high context socio-cultural backgrounds do not encourage them to critically evaluate others' opinions driving them to refrain from expressing their own views as well. However, verbal class participation is generally considered as the key factor of students' in-class performance (Jones, 2008). Thus, many teachers perceived that students from high context countries do not contribute to learning and are concerned that these students have the predispositions to shy away from verbal class participation (Bao, 2014; Kim, 2006).

Socio-cultural Factors

Stress coming from societal judgment driving students to silence rather than anxiety related to using the target language. (Cheng, 2000) brings in a concept that Asian students are perceived as reticent learners not because of cultural attributes but due to specific situations that make them look like they are passive. It is interesting to note that (Cheng, 2000) believes Asian students have strong desire to participate, but often certain factors such as different teaching/learning methods, values, and attitudes do not allow them to do so. This notion is supported by (Wu's,2015), Duff's (2010), Xia's (2009). claim that local and academic cultures greatly affect learners' ability to understand and participate. (Xia's (2009) and Liu's (2001) studies further discuss that classroom participation is shaped by various factors including pedagogical methods, sociocultural differences, cognitive aspects, and linguistic competences; when it comes to Asian international students in particular, it is observed that the lack of oral participation by these group of students were largely due to sociocultural reasons rather than linguistic incompetence. Quite a few studies elaborate that with appropriate encouragement and understandings of the cultural differences by teachers, Asian students do try to speak up and demonstrate their eagerness to share their ideas (Takahashi, 2019; Wu, 2015; Cheng, 2000). Respect towards teachers is salient in the teacher-centered classroom where the teacher is expected to initiate and govern communication and students speak only when asked to do so (Howard, 2009); this is perceived as a collective pedagogical method in maintaining classroom harmony. It is generally perceived that in most Asian countries, passivity indicates students' respect for teachers (Cheng, 2000). Lowering self and respecting others by listening rather than speaking is a social conduct deeply embedded in these high context cultures. Therefore, it is not surprising that many Asian students try to 'silently participate' rather than to speak up and state their opinions. Silent participation can be defined as keeping quiet verbally yet focusing and engaging with the speaker and the topic by actively listening (Kim, 2008). Through silent participation, students are transferring the symbolic power towards the instructor by being quiet yet attentive recipients in the classroom context. Silence is understood in different ways depending on certain situational context which is perceived as a form of communication. (Goodwin and Goodwin's (2004) participation framework states that verbal and nonverbal interactions all count as valuable input. In certain cultural settings such as Japan, 'wordless communication' is more appreciated (Schultz, 2009). Though generally Asian students are portrayed as a group shying away from oral participation, certainly there are differences among them; Chinese, Japanese, Malaysians, and Thais to name a few, may share similarities, however, cultural practices, values, and reasons vary in these societies which may differentially affect participation in class discussions (Lee, 2009). In this regard, the current study focuses on the barriers on students' oral participation in the classroom.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed qualitative design of research to explore the barriers on students' oral participation in the classroom. The study was designed to look deep into the participants' experiential knowledge (Berkes, 2004). Letter and consent form were distributed to potential participants.

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted among students from diverse ethnicity from the College of Agriculture, College of Teacher Education, and College of Information Technology and Computing Sciences.

Furthermore, the participants are purposely chosen/selected because these students were constantly observed as shy type or timid students in the class. By using purposive sampling approach, 10 students were chosen as interviewees. Out of 10 student participants, three of them were male and seven were female, their ages ranging from 18 to 21 years old. They were all enrolled as full-time students taking courses in their subject majors as well as taking some general education courses at the same time.

Data Collection Method

Focus group interviews and content analysis were selected as the data collection method. Since this study aimed to listen to students' perceptions of themselves within classroom settings, the researcher decided interaction amongst participants would generate dynamic data to gain collective view points and co-construct new knowledge based on group opinions (Gibbs, 2012; McLafferty, 2004). According to McLafferty (2004), focus group interviews can be an effective method to collect rich data from homogeneous groups on social realities of a culture. The dynamic interactions amongst participants were expected to add value to the stories and experiences of individuals as 'the key in focus group data is capturing participants' ideas and attitudes as they develop through group interaction and exchange' (Kelly, 2003). One-on-one interview with students may have given more detailed narratives of individual participants, however, for this particular study, the researcher decided focus group could generate different sets of interesting data due to the collective interaction and conversation amongst students. Additionally, the interview focused on the reasons for their silence during oral participation.

By listening to what the other participants shared during the focus group meeting, all participants were enthusiastically encouraged to voice out their stories and perceptions. Focus group discussions were arranged to unearth the participants' cognitive insights on their oral class participation and how they perceived it.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the data collected from the participants' outputs, the researcher used the content analysis process. Leedyand Ormrod (2005) postulated that content analysis is suitable in capturing the words of participants in text or written documents. In addition, Yin (2011) recommended the use of content analysis especially when a researcher uses gist and analyses in a study. According to Yin, gist analysis is appropriate for qualitative research since it enables the researcher to capture the meaning of the statements made by the participants. The gist analysis was used to identify the barriers on students' oral participation in the classroom.

Data were analyzed by drawing on thematic analysis method that delivered key themes and patterns (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Likewise, the participants were asked to narrate their experiences in oral discussions on blank sheets of paper. The participants' responses were carefully analyzed in words. Also, the data gathered were read and re-read to described what was common among the participants' experiences. Condensed meanings of the significant statements were formulated and were then categorized into codes and themes. Themes were labeled as truthfully and as accurately as possible.

Correspondingly, the gathered data were treated and employed in Hyper Research.

However, it was crucial to understand and interpret the data according to their experiences that enriched this study with various perspectives (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2013). The main themes emerged from coding the data were;1) inferiority complex, 2) social fear/phobia, 3) period of adjustment, 4) no self-esteem, 5) it is not customary to speak in class.

By coding and categorizing reoccurring words and phrases and repeated stories, the main themes were developed. According to (Hankok, Amankwaa, Revell, and Mueller (2016), focus group data can be more effectively presented when different methods of analysis are employed together to achieve data saturation. In order to determine data saturation, the researcher first looked into the themes derived and checked how many times and

how many respondents had brought up and elaborated on those certain themes. Themes emerged then pulled together and evaluated. The saturation point set by the researcher was five mentions per theme which were recorded accordingly.

RESULT AND DISCUSION

The findings revealed that the students who participated in this study are articulating the barriers in oral participation. The five-interesting themes relative to the barriers in oral participation which the researcher classified into different categories:

Theme 1: Inferiority Complex

According to (Smith, M. E. 2010), the term "conflict over difference" was used rather than the more familiar " inferiority complex" in order to emphasize the fact that it includes what is usually considered to be a mark of superiority; yet, if it does not fit in with the individual's ideal of what he should be or what he believes to be the ideal of his group, it will be considered instead to be a mark of inferiority. As observed by the researcher, during the oral activity, the students are perceived worried because they worry so much on the reactions of their classmates as well as their teachers. Thus, they are afraid to communicate.

The participants worried that inferiority complex is a barrier in oral participation. They agreed that they are being ridiculed by their classmates once they gave incorrect answers.

During the class observation, it was observed that their classmates even laughed at them when they forget to say something. This bad atmosphere made a barrier in class participation.

Six participants explained, *"Kaya po hindi ako nagrerecite dahil nahihiya po ako pag nagsasalita sa harap ng maraming tao."* (" The reason why I do not participate because I was ashamed in front of others")

 The participant mentioned, *"Feeling ko pag nagrecite ako mali ang masasabi ko at pagtatawanan ako ng iba."* ("I felt that my answer would be wrong and they would laugh at me").

The above statements of the participants indicate that teasing or criticizing is a negative reaction from others that contribute to the participants' silence in speaking. This hinders their ability to express their ideas freely.

This supports the claim of (Kalaivani G. 2017), inferiority is a feeling that arises from psychologically or socially lacking the subjective perceived feelings, as well as feelings arising from real weakness or disability. Feelings of inferiority are not a sign of abnormality, but rather the cause of all forms of perfection in human life because man is driven by the need to overcome his inferiority and is drawn by the desire to be superior (Hall & Lindzey 2017). Yet, most people fail in overcoming difficulties, so that they live with feelings of distress and suffering. Adler sees this as is not the end of the story because people will seek compensation by finding the good field, but at the same time will maintain that inferior feeling. Moreover, some people are not able to develop any good side under these circumstances, even (Booree 2017).

On the other hand, in a study revealed that 'silence' does not mean being inactive and shying away from class involvement, but it is just another form of participation (Schultz, 2009). This is also supported by Kim's (2008) study on non-native graduate students enrolled in an American university in which the participants said their silence meant they were immersed and engaged. Likewise, in line with Nakane's (2007) study that claims silence is practiced by Asian students to save face.

Theme 2: Social Fear/Phobia

Of all mental disorders, social phobia (i.e., social anxiety disorder [SAD]) is the third most commonly diagnosed and the most common anxiety disorder diagnosed (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Hofmann & Bögels, 2006). Furthermore, anxiety manifests from fear of being scrutinized, embarrassed, humiliated, or observed in social or performance-related situations (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Also, a certain amount of anxiety is expected in social situations to help prepare individuals for the future and avoid negative consequences (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). For individuals with social phobia, anxiety is significant enough to lead to dysfunctional occupational, interpersonal, and personal lifestyles (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

Two participants described, *"Kasi parang nagkaroon na ako ng phobia … mula nang nakitira ako sa tita ko. Feeling ko lahat ng isasagot ko puro mali".*
(When I stayed with my auntie, everything I do was wrong. I felt and experienced phobia. I thought that all my answers and responses were wrong")

The above response of the participant emphasized social phobia that hinder the students to speak.

This affirms the ideas of (Piet, Hougaard, Hecksher, & Rosenberg, 2010), social phobia tends to develop in childhood or adolescence and can be a lifelong disorder if never properly treated. Additionally, critical social impairments usually develop between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, among both males and females. The prevalence of social phobia in adults is around thirteen percent, with no significant difference between sexes (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). However, adults with social phobia are usually aware their anxiety and fear are excessive and unreasonable, but do not know how to address it. If medical conditions, medications, drugs or alcohol, or other mental disorders predispose an individual's social phobia, attending to the predisposing problem may help remediate the social phobia (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

In addition, the social embarrassment these people feel is deeply rooted in society. Therefore, the reason people shy away from voicing their opinions cannot be separated into external or internal factors rather, it is a complex mixture of both (Robinson and Ellis, 2008).

Similarly, it must be noted that there were different reasons for students to refrain from verbally participating in class; none of the participants mentioned that they were hesitant in speaking up due to their accent which was different from the study by Chung and Payne (2017). In Chung and Payne's (2017) research on Korean adult students, Korean participants claimed that they felt embarrassed when speaking in front of others since their accent was not authentic. Korean students revealed that the fear of getting the language wrong in front of the natives were bigger than the cultural factors; Korean students paid much attention to their accent, pronunciation, and grammatical mistakes implying they were reluctant to verbally participate due to linguistic reasons. Majority of the Korean students in Chung and Payne (2017) said they wanted to share their opinions, but it was the fear of making mistakes using this foreign language that made them become quiet learners.

Theme 3: Period of Adjustment

School adjustment is the psychological processes accustomed to adapt, cope, and manage the issues sweet-faced in the standard of living.

(Newman, R.S., 2010), School adjustment plays a vital role in a child's life, and it is like a pillar on which child's entire life is based. It is not only related to a child's progress and achievement, but also their attitudes towards school, anxieties, loneliness, social support and academic motivation. Interpersonal relationship affects children's academic motivation.

The participant uttered, *"Hindi pa po kami attached sa mga classmate namin dahil transferee kami".* (We are in the process of adjustment with our classmates since we are transferees)

 The above statement of the participant indicates period of adjustment. This affirms the ideas of (Lu, Y. and Zhou, H.,2012), "Research shows that children's loneliness and social dissatisfaction relate negatively to school achievement.

This supports the ideas of (Erath, S.A., Flanagan, K.S. and Bierman, K.L., 2008), Friendship supports children in the school environment and help with their adjustment. Peers can be a source of support to deal with problems and child is able to deal with alienation.

Furthermore, (Wentzel, K.R., 2002), "Effective adjustment to school depends on children possessing a range of skills and behaviors (social, emotional/behavioral and academic skills) that help them adapt to and participate in the school environment.

Also, (Chen, X., Chen, H., Li, D. and Wang, L., 2009), "Children who are adjusting well have a sense of belonging to the new school – they feel comfortable, secure and relaxed rather than anxious, fearful or upset. They listen to and follow instructions, interact well with others, share and take turns, cope with normal day-to-conflicts and are able to manage their feelings and emotions appropriately. They are interested in learning and are motivated to take part in school activities.

Likewise, (Birch, S. and Ladd, G.,2002), Students face many adjustments in school. From year to year, there are changes in teachers, classrooms, school and class rules and procedures, performance expectations, difficulty of the work, and peers. Their successes in negotiating these challenges predict school success. In the classroom, motivation drives many behaviors and it is important to understand the importance of motivation in an educational environment.

In addition, silence can work well in the classrooms at Thai universities since it is the cultural norm (Komolsevin, Knutson, & Datthuyawat, 2010); by silently participating, students are collectively trying to harmonize the classroom dynamics by transferring the power to the teacher. Though generally students' silence is often viewed negatively (Schultz, 2009).

This also aligns with Takahashi's (2019) assertion that in-class participation means much more than just participation; it is about understanding the role and value of communication that construct the dynamics of power and knowledge sharing in the classroom. Silence can indeed be a form of participation especially when larger social context such as cultural practices affects students to be reticent (Schultz, 2009).

Theme 4: No Self-esteem

Indeed, excessive low self-esteem makes these feelings are more difficult to overcome, such as the emergence of complexes of low self or complex for superiority. But normal condition of inferiority feeling is a driver of progress or perfection or superiority.

The participant uttered, *"Kaya di ako nagrerecite dahil wala akong tiwala sa aking sarili".* ("I do not have self-confident that's why I don't participate")

The above statements signify that the participant was unable to speak and this was seen during the observation.

This affirms the ideas of (Safura et al., 2014), "Work is, above all, an activity through which an individual fit into the world, creates new relations, uses his talents, learns and grows to develop his identity and a sense of belonging". Generally, the concept of self-esteem anchor by various researchers in the realm of emotions as a socially built emotion representing perceptions and feelings about individuals' various self-images and self-concept's which are based upon the psychosomatic need for the aspiration of authentic and efficacious functioning, belonging and acceptance within one's social group, achievement and competence in contrast to other members of individuals' group (Bruno & Njoku, 2014).

On the other hand, Tulloch (2015) recommends that a learners' degree of self-esteem is highly related to language anxiety; thus, people who lack self-confidence worry about what their peers' comments.

However, (Schachner, M.K.,2014) Self-enhancement means that students compare themselves socially with friends and judge their capabilities partly on the basis of these comparisons. Need to be correct refer to a student's desire to hold correct beliefs.

Theme 5: It is not customary to speak in class

Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing information. Choosing topics, organizing thoughts, tailoring the message, and adapting to listener feedback (Lucas, 2001).

The participant mentioned, *"Hindi ko nakasanayan ang magrecite sa klase".* (It is not my usual way of doing such an oral participation or recitation).

The above statement show that the participant was unable to speak and this was seen during the observation.

This affirms the ideas of (Gorjian B. et.al. 2015), students are encouraged to use the types of communicative strategies as means of sharing information which are adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological, or linguistic purpose. One of this type is turn-taking communicative strategy that requires that each speaker speaks only when it is his/her turn during an interaction.

On the other hand, Schultz's (2009) statement nicely captures this notion; 'the students are not always silent; they are silent in response to locally specific contexts and activities.

In contrary, in a study reveals that an act of participation and at the same time an effective way of saving face by avoiding judgement; silence did not mean shying away for many of these students, rather it meant they were organizing their thoughts in order to deeply comprehend what was being said and taught an effective method to keep the classroom dynamics in harmony (Chung, 2021)

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the barriers in oral participation in the class. The data revealed that this was largely caused by inferiority complex, social phobia or fear, period of adjustment, no self-esteem and not customary to speak in class. Thus, the results of this study suggest that teachers should be aware of the existence of these barriers in their classrooms.

Based on this, educators should engage students with learning in different ways. Each student has unique talents and skills that shape learning. Student-centered learning is personalized, engaging, competency-based and not restricted to the classroom. Students take greater responsibility for their learning and support each other's progress, so every student gets the skills he or she needs to succeed and contribute to society. Student-centered learning engages students in their own success and incorporates their interests and skills into the learning process.

Teachers should consider friendly classroom environment as one of the most important factors affecting student learning. Simply put, students learn better when they view the learning environment as positive and supportive (Dorman, Aldridge, & Fraser, 2006). A positive environment is one in which students feel a sense of belonging, trust others, and feel encouraged to tackle challenges, take risks, and ask questions (Bucholz & Sheffler, 2009). Such an environment provides relevant content, clear learning goals and feedback, opportunities to build social skills, and strategies to help students succeed (Weimer, 2009).

In education, student engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education" (edglossary.org). When students are engaged with the lesson being taught, they learn more and retain more. Students who are engaged in the work tend to persist more and find joy in completing the work. These teaching strategies encourage students to use their imagination to dig deep when engaging with the content of the lesson. The students are actively involved with the learning and can work with their peers in collaborative groups to showcase their learning.

Teacher may consider social skills to communicate and interact with each other, both verbally and non-verbally, through gestures, body language and our personal appearance. Human beings are sociable creatures and we have developed many ways to communicate our messages, thoughts and feelings with others. Social skills are important because they can help you communicate more effectively and efficiently and, as a result, help you build, maintain and grow relationships with colleagues, clients and new contacts alike.

However, this study even suggests further investigation to extend deeper findings. It ends with a view to increase teachers' awareness and improve classroom practices to reduce barriers in oral participation.

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