THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SILENCE: DIFFERENCES IN MEANING, LEARNING STYLES, AND TEACHING STRATEGIES IN CROSS-CULTURAL SETTINGS

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This exploratory study focused on a concern that is often expressed in New Zealand tertiary institutions about Chinese (and other Asian) students’ lack of participation in classroom discussions. It explores the nature of silence in both Western and Chinese cultures and pedagogies, and relates the differences to the expectations teachers and learners bring to the classroom. To bridge these differences in expectations, a culturally synergistic model of workshops was proposed and trialled at a student learning support centre. Results showed that spontaneous oral participation by Chinese students was greater in the specially structured workshops, and that having structured activities within any workshop increased participation more than simply asking general questions and addressing the whole class. These findings suggest a need to further investigate wider classroom applications of the new workshop structure that scaffolds discussion and allows Chinese students to explore their understanding. The findings also suggest that too much weight is put on the expectation that Chinese students are silent because of their heritage.

Key words: Chinese university students, international students, silence, class participation, learning support

The increase of Chinese students in New Zealand (NZ) university classrooms has brought with it the challenge of ensuring these students are learning what they have come to New Zealand expecting to learn. McGrath and Butcher (2003) have written in depth about the responsibility that host institutions have towards their international students and the immorality of a system that ‘sells’ an expensive desirable product achievable in a supportive climate, but then has less support than ‘advertised’.

There are now numerous writings which elucidate the differences between Western students and students from China and other Asian cultures, and the ways in which the backgrounds of the students impact on their learning behaviours and the expectations they bring to the classroom. Differences that have been described between students from Western cultures and students from China and other Asian cultures include classroom behaviour, expectations of teacher-student relationships, academic writing styles, and

One difference that has caused concern is the greater amount of silence evidenced and lesser quantity of questioning initiated by Chinese students in classes which Western students recognise as appropriate forums for learning dialogues. Chinese student non-participation in whole-class discussions potentially reduces their opportunity to clarify course concepts and makes it difficult for Western teachers to ascertain whether they are meeting all their students’ needs. It is important, then, to try to establish a learning environment that will encourage participation by Chinese students; however it is equally important to understand the cultural and pedagogical nature of their silence and the positive and negative roles that silence has in learning.

This paper considers some of the Western and Chinese differences in cultural and pedagogical views about silence. It argues that while silence has different meanings in a learning setting for Chinese students, their silence should not always be interpreted as a desire to be non-participatory in discussions. After examining some of the potential reasons for the silence of Chinese students in class settings, the paper then discusses workshop styles that are employed within the context of a student learning centre in NZ. In this section, a new approach to engaging students (both Western and Chinese) was explored in workshops with the intent to increase the level of discussion and Chinese students’ engagement. Overall the results of this approach were positive.

*Speech is Silver, Silence is Gold: Definitions of Silence*

Silence, in general terms, is usually perceived to be the absence of sound. In communicative contexts, silence is usually considered to be the absence of, or the opposite to, speech. Sobkowiak (1997) categorised the act of silence within communicative contexts into five types: refraining from speech; absence of sound; withholding knowledge; failure to communicate; and oblivion or obscurity. This categorisation suggests that silence is somehow an ‘undesirable’ act, occurring in opposition to something that ‘should’ be happening (speaking, making sound, providing knowledge, communicating, and making obvious).

However, numerous philosophers and writers have argued against the negative connotations associated with silence being a “lack” (Berryman, 1999). Additionally, referring to Picard’s writing on silence, Zembylas and Michaelides (2004, p. 194) argued that “silence is best understood as a positive, not a negative phenomenon. It carries meaning by the virtue of it being an absence (of speech); it can say something merely by leaving something unsaid”. As Liu (2002, p. 38) noted, “It is not the case that a person who is silent has nothing to say”.

In response to the often negative and ambiguous definitions of silence, Berryman (1999) developed a quadrant that expresses the interplay between the verbal and non-verbal aspects of ‘silence’ and communication. Fig. 1 shows the two interacting axes described by Berryman (p. 263). He acknowledged that motivation for ‘an absence of sound’ can be either or both internally and externally located.
If silence is part of a dialogue, whether one is quiet-still or silent-still or both, depends on the context within which the communicative dialogue takes place. For example, within the context of a class, students will be quiet to ensure they can obtain required information; they may be silent if the lecturer arrives and asks them to stop talking to allow the lecture to begin. Governing the motivation and action of quiet/silence are the rules of communicative competence of the university and wider culture. Both silence and communicative competence depend on context for interpretation, and context is culturally defined (Liu, 2002).

No Wisdom Like Silence: Silence and Cultural Contexts

Negative definitions associated with silence have tended to come from Western perspectives. Zembylas and Michaelides (2004) pointed out the Western interpretation of equating an absence of speech with lack of communication. It may be perceived as “a mark of oppression, denial of self, dependency and at best immaturity” (Yancy & Spooner, 1994, p. 304). Generally speaking, ‘Westerners’ are not at ease with silence. In contrast, Chinese people are comfortable with silence. Silence is perceived to be beneficial for higher thinking (Kim, 2002), and is valued as demonstrating ‘wisdom’ as the proverb “no wisdom like silence” denotes. Silence in China reflects Confucian values of modesty and thinking of others. Remaining ‘quiet’ allows the individual to think before speaking and possibly embarrassing themselves or others. This is related to the concept of saving face. Liu (2002) argued that the concept of ‘face’ in China consists of two elements (see Fig. 2): “Lian, which stands for the respect of the group for a man with good moral reputations” and Mianzi “that refers to prestige and reputation” (p. 39). The former carries more weight. Losing Lian would be to suffer condemnation, while losing Mianzi indicates the loss of reputation.

The Chinese concept of face “encodes a reputable image that individuals can claim for themselves as they interact with others in a given community” (Liu, 2002, p. 41).

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1 Terms such as ‘Western’ and ‘Chinese’ are used to differentiate cultural viewpoints; however, this does not imply that cultures within these categories are polar opposites on a ‘continuum’ of silence. It is also acknowledged that overlaps exist between these two groups in different contexts.
Hence, people may refrain from commenting or asking questions to save face, and in some instances, to save time (not asking what they may perceive as less important questions of someone who may be busy, and seeking the information elsewhere). This is also related to the social conventions of hierarchy.

First Think, Then Speak: Silence, Culture and Pedagogy

Many class settings in NZ universities encourage dialogue and discussion because of the fundamental underlying assumption that talking enhances and develops thinking. Kim (2002) explored the concept of ‘we talk, therefore we think’, comparing American and Asian American cognitive processes. He concluded from the results of his research that for Western Americans talking enhances their thinking processes, while the opposite occurred for Asian Americans. He also demonstrated that students’ beliefs about whether talking would improve their thinking were correlated with their performance. Talking, therefore, in Western pedagogical practice is positively valued by both students and teachers. Students are expected to speak up in class, express their own opinion and their individuality, and demonstrate and affirm their knowledge. The teacher is viewed as a facilitator to develop discussion and the student’s ability to contribute and think in tutorials. It is understood that the norms associated with this ‘learning’ communication situation determine that to not respond (to be silent) is a negative response.

Within a Chinese pedagogy, silence has quite a different role. This is reflected in expectations of the teacher, who is perceived as a dispenser of knowledge, and who is privileged with students’ quietness. The limitation of questions in this setting is related to saving face, avoiding wasting of time, and respect for others. There is an emphasis on speaking only when necessary. Quality of what is said has more emphasis than the number of times a person speaks (hence the need to think in quietness before speaking). The perception that talking and thinking are correlated does not hold true for Chinese pedagogy. As one Chinese student in a recent study noted about her participation in a Chinese classroom setting: “I listen, I think, I do not talk” (Li et al., 2002). Quietness and silence are an integral part of Chinese cultural and school literacies. The findings of Liu’s (2002) study on Chinese postgraduate students studying in the USA affirmed this also.

![Diagram](image)

**Fig. 2.** The two elements of saving face.
Liu presented a metacognitive view of the students’ silence as they reflected on their participation or non-participation. The reasons students gave for their silence did include ignorance of content, but they also focused on their cultural and pedagogical beliefs about what enhanced learning for themselves and others.

**Better to Say Nothing, Than Nothing to the Purpose: Chinese Students’ Silence**

Much of the reported research on the silence of Chinese students in class employs the Western pedagogical assumptions of the negativity of silence. The silence of Chinese students in class has been variously interpreted as passiveness, laziness, selfishness, and a lack of confidence – with research focusing the ‘issue of silence’ onto the students (Li et al., 2002; Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Tompson & Tompson, 1996). Despite this research, strategies for both learners and teachers to address the situation are limited. However, responsibility for ‘silence’ occurring in the classroom lies not only with the student. Teaching strategies, expectations of the teacher, and the classroom context combine to create a cultural learning encounter. Fig. 3 illustrates the ‘cultural learning encounter’ concept and the interacting factors of the classroom communicative context.

In cultural learning encounters norms are not always shared or understood, and this may lead to ‘expectancy violation’ (Li et al., 2002). For example, students who are familiar with the Western cultural learning encounter may perceive Chinese students as lazy for not ‘participating’ in tutorial discussions, while the Chinese student may consider those students who contribute a lot to be showing off. The cultural learning encounter demonstrates that perceived Chinese students’ silence is a combination of silence and quietness and is heavily influenced by the cultural, pedagogical and communicative competencies and expectations of those involved in this encounter. It highlights the need for cultural synergy by all involved in the encounter to understand the expectations of the different university learning situation. It provides further support for the argument that
NZ teachers, lecturers and learning support staff need to be proactive in helping Chinese students learn to learn in the ‘discussion’ mode of the NZ classroom. Teachers need to develop strategies and to understand that it is necessary to provide for quietness too, rather than labelling the silent as passive or shy and resenting students approaching them with questions after class time.

The evidence suggesting that there are psychologically entrenched differences between the Chinese learners and Western students in their approach to learning situations is also important for learning advisers\(^2\) to consider. Chinese students often attend tertiary skills workshops not only to improve their writing skills, for example, but to gain insight and orientation to Western-style learning contexts. That this is a desirable thing to do comes from the voices of the students themselves. Research studies by Beaver and Bhat (2002), Durkin (2003), Jackson (2002), and Liu (2002) all contain commentary from Chinese students about wanting to participate but finding it difficult to do so, especially in their first semester as a student in a foreign institution. Indeed the students in Jackson’s study on tutorial participation identified not only their reasons for not participating, but also the conditions under which they felt they could or could not participate. Several contrasts existed. Chinese students would worry about the value of the points they were to say if asked to contribute to a large group, but would discuss these with a peer before answering if called upon to do so. If they disagreed with a point made by the teacher or another classmate, they would not express their disagreement but would raise the issue out of class or in a small group. Additionally, although they felt anxious when called on to speak, they also did not usually reply to general questions addressed to a whole class as they did not see these as “genuine invitations to speak” (Jackson, 2002, p. 77).

These observations, however, do not imply that Chinese students do not see the value of discussions, nor wish to participate. Liu’s (2002) paper indicated that Chinese students can see the value of discussion because it provides examples and clarification which otherwise would not be available to them, but participation is still difficult. More confident Chinese students also valued it as an opportunity to help others, but only when they were knowledgeable. McCallum (2004) also reported that New Zealand teachers could create an environment for active participation when they had established “a common ground of learning” (p. 42). In fact it seems from the review of the literature that it is the techniques used by Western teachers to set up discussion, rather than the discussion itself, which cause problems for students and further inhibit their interaction. If that is so, there should be ways of creating a workshop structure so that, when participation is desirable, all students there have the opportunity to be part of the discussion component.

A second reason that contributes to the desirability of increasing the participation of Chinese students in workshops presented by learning advisers is that these workshops are additional to the students’ normal class times and the students who attend them are likely to be concerned about their academic progress. Thus, it is important that the students get

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\(^2\) The term learning advisers/adviser is used as a generic title for the learning support staff within this university. Whilst their teaching role is similar to that of many university tutors, they are also involved in a broader range of research, curriculum development and programme activities.
value from the extra effort they are making and that learning advisers present information in such a way that students can understand and, if necessary, discuss it. Even though workshops receive student evaluations, positively marked evaluation sheets may reflect the students’ desire to save face for the learning adviser. Furthermore, the workshops provided through learning centres are also often unique in that the students attending could be different each week and therefore no relationship or tutorial atmosphere can be cultivated over time as is usually possible in subject tutorial groups. Accordingly, then, to provide an adviser with direct feedback on how well students are following the topic, workshops need to be structured to require participation and dialogue in ways which overcome some of the causes of silence, and yet also allow for silence so that the learning encounter comprises of elements suitable for all cultures.

The key ideas that emerged from the above review of the literature about silence, Chinese students, and Western and Chinese pedagogy, as well as reflections in relation to the learning support context, were tested in a series of practical workshops. A new workshop structure was developed and examined to find out whether a different approach may increase participation in discussion by students, especially Chinese students. The remainder of this paper focuses on the design of this new workshop compared to traditional workshops, and an assessment of its effectiveness.

**METHOD**

The workshops examined in this study were part of the regular series of study skills workshops offered at the learning centre of a university in NZ during the first semester of the academic year. Writing and learning skills workshops are held throughout the semester mainly for first year students, and international students in their first semester of university study in New Zealand are particularly encouraged to attend in order to learn the expectations of the university. Many international students do attend, much more so than the NZ-born students, and in the previous year, learning advisers had noted that the greatest number of international students present at workshops were from China. Workshops have had no set structure but they are seen as forums where students can and do receive clarification on a wide range of learning and writing issues. This is especially so when students raise their own concerns. Advisers expect and encourage discussion but not all advisers plan collaborative activities. In this study, a specific structure was used to encourage all students to participate in planned written and discussion activities.

*Workshop Structure:*

Three advisers trialled the new workshops that included time spent on instruction combined with small group task and discussion activities. The difference between these workshops and others was that the ‘discussion’ activities had at least two steps before any student was required to speak to the whole group. The first of these steps was a written task, for example: “Write down what you think are the main causes of your anxiety at exam time.” The second step was for the adviser to begin discussions by asking each person to share their thoughts with at least one other person in the workshop. The advisers could vary the strategy and size of groups at this point (and it sometimes depended on the number present at the workshops). The adviser could, for example, ask the students to “think, pair, and share (their ideas with the person they have paired
The third step was either a combining of two groups so that there was further discussion among the four to six students, or a reporting back to the whole group facilitated by the learning adviser. Fig. 4 shows the combination and sequence of activities in one of these workshops.

The pedagogical advantage of this structure is that it allows students time to form a response independently and, in psychological terms, learning advisers are not requesting that the students ‘talk as they think’. The discussion/sharing activity allows students to affirm their thoughts (in a convergent situation) or compare and discuss their responses (in a divergent situation). The additional step of combining groups provides both additional examples and more affirmation, and could help boost students’ confidence. The gradual ‘stepping up’ of the discussion activities was aimed to decrease anxiety and shyness when reporting back to the group, to give practice at participating in small group activities and, for the Chinese students, to provide greater opportunity for expressing personal views in English. It was also hoped that in participating in sessions with this structure, and recognising that it was good to participate, more students, including Chinese students, would ask questions of either the adviser or other students in the whole group setting.

Observations:
To determine the effectiveness of the new workshop structure, observations were made by one researcher who attended seven workshops and kept a log of the activities and interactions that occurred during each 50 minute session. As three out of six advisers used the new workshop structure, it was possible to compare the amount and type of verbal interactions that occurred during these workshops with the type of talk in workshops that had a different structure.

All workshops were held in a small classroom with the seating arranged in either a U formation or with students seated around a large square arrangement of desks. To make the observations the researcher sat on one side near the front and so could easily see who was talking. Each student present was given a number just as the workshop began (any latecomers were added) and their position in the room noted on a diagram. The gender of each student was noted too. The researcher kept a written log of the sequence of activities and the interactions that occurred in each workshop. The focus of the log was the verbal interactions that occurred within the workshop time when the whole group was working with the adviser, though other behaviours such as texting, nodding, copying the overhead transparency (OHT), or talking to the learning adviser after the workshop were also noted. The researcher recorded who spoke (using their number and gender), why they spoke (i.e., asked a question, answered a question made by the adviser, answered another student’s question, or talked to a friend), and when talking occurred (i.e., after a question from the learning adviser, before or after an activity, or after another student had spoken). Observations of the amount of talk by each student in the small group discussion segments were not made.

At the end of the workshop, students were asked individually if they were New Zealanders, permanent residents of New Zealand, or international students. If they identified as international students, they were then asked what country they were from. Because of the small classroom and small number of students (the largest workshop had 15 students) this was not difficult.

Analysis:
The log of each workshop was analysed and spoken interactions were coded into three categories: responding oral; responding written; and spontaneous oral. Responding oral included all student talk that occurred because it was a response to an adviser’s question or instruction. The responding written category included written answers, either on the whiteboard or paper, that were solicited by the learning adviser as part of a whole group activity. Spontaneous oral coding included all spoken questions and comments from students to the adviser, or to other students, that occurred within a whole group discussion and were not prompted or solicited by the adviser.

For tabulating results, students were placed into three groups: NZ students – students who were born in NZ; Chinese students – students from China attending the university as full fee paying international students; and other international students – full fee paying students from countries other than China. This last group included students from India, Sri Lanka, New Guinea, and Japan. No students from the Pacific Islands, or students not born in NZ but who held residency status, attended any of the observed workshops.

3In the NZ education system, students who are NZ-born or who hold permanent resident status are subsidised by the government and pay lower tuition fees compared to international students who pay full fees (with the exception of international students undertaking doctoral studies in universities).
RESULTS

Workshop Formats

Analysis of the written observations showed that the workshops fell into three categories: a lecture format (Type A); a format that combined mostly instruction by the adviser with one exercise (Type B); and the new workshops with the planned ‘interactive’ format (Type C). All the workshops were 50 minutes long.

Type A workshops had no set exercises and no small group activities. Learning advisers interacted by asking questions of the whole group. These workshops were found to have low rates of oral participation by all students, and especially by Chinese students. Table 1 shows the number of student interactions in the two workshops of this kind. As the data show, the rate of interaction was very low for all students. Advisers did solicit student responses with general questions about understanding to the whole group, but these were followed by silence or the occasional questions from New Zealand students. In fact a high proportion of adviser-asked questions went unanswered. A large proportion of these workshops was carried out with teacher ‘talk’ and learner ‘silence’. However Chinese students did have questions, and both of these workshops were followed by a 10 minute period where Chinese students stayed behind and asked the learning adviser topic-related questions.

Type B workshops had at least one written exercise part way through the workshop which provided practice on the main topic. Although there was more participation by Chinese students, this was responsive rather than spontaneous and there were still 40% of adviser questions that went unanswered. Table 2 shows the rate of participation in the two workshops that were presented in this manner. Not surprisingly, students, including
Chinese students, made longer responses. The higher rate of spontaneous participation in one workshop originated with one NZ student who became argumentative with the learning adviser about a specific issue and this led to two other students, one NZ and one international, asking related questions. This incident did not increase the Chinese students’ participation. Like Type A, these workshops were still largely teacher ‘talk’ and learner ‘silence’, particularly for the Chinese students. The advantages though were that students’ understanding was checked, and Chinese students received practice at participating in a Western classroom setting when they competently presented responses prepared as part of the exercise.

Type C workshops had at least one written exercise part way through the workshop followed by a small group activity for students to compare and discuss their thoughts. The data in Table 3 show that not only did Chinese students respond more within the whole group after completing the combined ‘write, then talk’ structure, but they also asked more spontaneous questions, either following on from another student’s remarks or seeking clarification from the adviser. They also made longer contributions – with some of the Chinese students making several points instead of one, or taking a second turn at speaking voluntarily. Questions from the learning adviser were also answered. The participation rate of Chinese students in these workshops was very similar to those of other students. The structure of these workshops did mandate discussion in the small group exercises, so most silence was confined to the writing times. What differed was that in the adviser-led segments that followed discussion activities, many more students (including the Chinese students) took the opportunity to ask questions during these times.

There were other points observed and noted that merit further consideration. Group size seemed to be an influential factor, and in the largest of the Type C workshops,
Chinese students did not answer any oral questions the adviser asked during the whole group discussion. However, they did ask spontaneous questions. The timing of activities also seemed to have an effect. All three of the Type C workshops had an activity at the very beginning – either an icebreaker or a “think, pair and share”. In contrast the Type B workshops tended to have their written exercise well into the workshop time (one at 35 mins; one at 40 mins) and this may have restricted opportunities for whole group discussion to flourish. When activities were timed earlier in the workshop, there was more spontaneous interaction later, and still time for the adviser to close the workshop by recapping the main points. Figure 4 gives the sequence for the most effective combination of activities that was observed.

In the workshop that used the combination shown in Fig. 4, Chinese students participated fully from the very start. Although there was some initial reluctance to engage in the icebreaker activity, everyone did complete the exercise and there was a much quicker response to the second activity which followed straight after. One Chinese student had difficulty understanding the structure of the second written activity, but received help straight away from her NZ student partner and then shared her answer first. One Chinese student had so many ideas to share after her discussion with her Chinese partner that she put her hand up to have a second turn when the groups reported back.

Table 3. Participation Rate of Different Groups of Students Who Attended Type C Workshops

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workshop Number</th>
<th>Student Groups</th>
<th>Spontaneous Oral</th>
<th>Responding Oral</th>
<th>Responding Written</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Participation Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>Chinese (n = 2)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7/2 = 3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NZ (n = 2)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6/2 = 3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other International (n = 2)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6/2 = 3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>Chinese (n = 7)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12/7 = 1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NZ (n = 3)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8/3 = 2.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other International (n = 2)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3/2 = 1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>Chinese (n = 3)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15/3 = 5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NZ (n = 2)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9/2 = 4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other International (n = 1)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5/1 = 5.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In general, observations showed that other interpersonal factors possibly played a role too in affecting the students’ levels of participation. In at least three workshops there were other (non-Chinese) international students who were confident about participating spontaneously. Chinese students seemed to attend closely to these students’ comments and questions and in several instances Chinese students asked follow-up questions after these students had spoken. In another workshop all the students, especially the international male students, became very interested in a response about a scary movie made by a female Chinese student, speculating about the title of the movie. This workshop was noisy for a couple of minutes and, although semi-irrelevant, the incident fostered a connection within the whole group for the rest of the workshop.

Several workshops had incidents that seemed to stem participation. In particular anything that caused tension reduced participation and increased silence. Asking questions such as “Is everyone happy?” or “Shall we move on?” seemed to increase silence, as did repeating the same question. One adviser used very wordy overhead transparencies and several Chinese students spent time looking at these and consulting electronic translators. None of these students participated in any discussion until the workshop finished.

**DISCUSSION**

The combination of the strategies employed in the more interactive Type C workshop produced results that were more in line with Jackson’s (2002) and McGrath and Butcher’s (2003) comments about international students. The results suggest that Chinese students are willing to actively participate in circumstances that give time for thought, provide periods of quietness and silence, allow for any language difficulties, are not confusing, and create discussion with relevance to their learning. Although observations were taken from only seven workshops, including three that used the new Type C structure, and student attendance numbers were small, differences were evident in the participation data gathered. Whilst the average rate of participation across Type B and C workshops was similar for the Chinese student groups, the number of spontaneous oral
interactions made by Chinese students was greater in the Type C workshops. The Chinese students in the Type C workshops also appeared more ready to ask questions and add comments to discussions that were taking place after the small group activities, than they appeared to be in the workshops where there were fewer or no collaborative activities included.

This higher participation at the class level was the type of increased communication that was intended. Although the overall participation rate of Chinese students in Type C workshops was similar to Type B, the apparent increase in internally motivated communication observed from the Chinese students in the Type C workshops was encouraging. Additionally, although the participation data do not differentiate enough between the Type B and C structures for definitive conclusions to be made, they do show the advantage of structuring activities within workshops as a means of increasing participation by Chinese students (or any students) over the frequently used method of asking general questions of the whole group. Further investigations using the new Type C workshop structure would provide more conclusive information about the usefulness of this particular format for learning advisers and the students they teach.

It is also worth considering the importance of the relationship between discussion and grading. Li et al. (2002) suggested that Chinese students are likely to engage in discussion only when it has an assessment weighting. This, they argued, indicates the pedagogical value placed on speaking by Chinese students (lower than other processes), and highlights that motivation (driven by assessment) is a key component in speaking. In the learning and writing skills workshops described in the present study, no assessment was given. Students were motivated to attend these workshops to improve their study skills (which in turn could improve their assessment outcomes), but they did not need to speak or participate in discussions to do this. They could have remained quiet during the workshops and yet, during the Type C sessions with the new structure, they began to speak more readily.

In this exploratory study the measure of success was a raised level of participation at the class level. The successful group strategies that were used to encourage speaking included five key points: using small groups first; snowballing group cohesion; choosing topics for group work that all students could relate to, as suggested by Li (2004) and Durkin (2003); providing a written guide to focus discussion; and providing clear explanations as to why the group strategy was being used, and its application to other university settings. Including these strategies in the workshop structure produced a higher level of participation in the Type C workshops. In contrast, the Chinese students were less responsive in the workshops where the sequence with small group tasks was not used. In terms of Berryman’s (1999) model, their quietness and silence changed when the cultural learning encounter was altered by the NZ learning adviser’s use of strategies that allowed them to choose to speak or be quiet, and to use this choice to enhance their own learning. Having students who are responsive within a learning support environment is important as it allows learning advisers to focus more specifically on student needs and to identify aspects that need to be developed and refined in other workshops.

The observations and experiences from the workshops explored in the present study
suggest that putting more careful thought to the construction of workshops can increase the amount of talking and question-raising by Chinese students. The combination of a written exercise followed by pairings or small groups seems to meld the learning style of the Chinese students with the Western expectation that ‘we talk to learn’ (Kim, 2002) without taking away all the silence or time for explicit instruction. The enthusiastic participation from Chinese students that eventuated within the structure, especially when they found the activities highly relevant, fits with Liu and Littlewood’s (1997) observations that possibly too much weight is being put on the expectation that Chinese students will be silent or passive because of their ‘heritage’. The use of a workshop structure that scaffolds discussion shows that Chinese students do have a desire to explore, but that this desire may often be restrained in the English-speaking culture by their lack of confidence in spoken English and the new learning environment they are operating in, as well as their lack of familiarity with NZ examples used in many class discussions.

There is a need for further investigations to ‘fill the gaps’ of this exploratory study. For example, it was not possible to document the amount of silence evidenced by students in their individual groups; there were some possible gender effects that were not adequately documented to meaningfully report and discuss here; and further observations on the use of questions and the way the advisers respond to questions from students are needed. A more comprehensive study needs to be undertaken to collect data from more student groups so as to allow appropriate statistical analyses of results. It would be advantageous to repeat the observations in different settings, and to focus on the participation rates of other Asian and EAL (English as an additional language) student groups.

The use of small groups to reduce Chinese students’ anxiety about their English competence may be one important reason for the Type C workshop structure’s success. For all students it provides a ‘workshop’ pattern of talk and quiet, rather than simply allowing students to draw on their usual culture-based learning competence (i.e., in this case, where group participation is concerned) – a situation which often leads to Chinese students being misunderstood because of their ‘silence’. For Chinese students, that the new workshop structure provided opportunities to express their needs and develop skills is useful not only in the Western classroom, but also more generally in Western social settings. The structure does not attempt to change students’ learning styles but encourages acceptance and appreciation of other cultures’ literacy. The findings of this study also suggest that there are opportunities Western teachers could consider to increase their teaching repertoire, so that learning in NZ for example can become a more positive and stimulating experience for international students, avoiding the potential for it to become a time of rejection and frustration for both teachers and students. As one colleague at a campus seminar reporting on the present study commented, “These results give me courage. I have been turning workshops into lectures as I thought this was what the Chinese students liked and needed. I will now be returning to interactive workshops with group tasks.”

REFERENCES


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