

## **Chinese University Students' Lack of Oral Involvements in the Classroom: Identifying and Breaking the Barriers**

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Gatherings data via 202 questionnaires and 13 in-depth interviews with the students and teachers from a Chinese university in Beijing, this paper investigates Chinese students' lack of oral involvement in the university classes. The findings suggest that their reticence is mostly due to the traditional Chinese beliefs and culture, students' previous school experiences, their social and psychological reasons based fears and class size. Although the teachers were not mentioned as one of the key reasons, they can be the most important agents of change. China is trying to move toward student-centred learning, but the schools and the students are not yet fully prepared for it. The paper suggests a 'teacher-driven, student-centred learning' approach for such transitional period, with teachers assuming more proactive. This paper focuses on the classroom-interaction side. It suggests that the teachers should use questions throughout the lecture, and prepare their slides in an interesting and thought-provoking way. Students should be encouraged to overcome various social and psychological fears that prevent them from speaking in the classroom. For the issue of large class size, the teachers should move around in the class or stand in the middle to decrease the sense of distance.

**Keywords:** *Student-centered learning, classroom interaction, Chinese students, Chinese culture*

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### **Introduction**

Chinese students' reticence or lack of oral involvement in the classroom has been debated and discussed for quite a long time (Cortazzi, & Jin 1996; Miller, & Aldred, 2000; Wang, 2011; Malik, & Sang, 2017), but most of the literature focuses on the classes in which English is taught as a subject or a second/ foreign language (Cortazzi, & Jin, 1996; Li, 1998; Liu & Jackson, 2008, 2009; Wang, 2011). Most of such research cites the impact of foreign language as one of the key causes. Some other literature investigates the classroom oral involvement of the Chinese students in other countries and compares it with that of native (non-Chinese) students to see the differences (McMahon, 2011; Lu, Le & Fan, 2012). In both situations, language related issues, and foreign environment and culture could impact the Chinese students' oral

involvement in the classes and were accordingly found to be two of the key reasons behind that. Malik and Sang (2017) compared the classroom oral involvement and interaction of the Chinese and international students who were taught in Chinese and English language separately. Their findings revealed that this lack of oral involvement existed even in the university classes in China where the language of classroom interaction and instruction was Chinese. This paper investigates to find out the causes of the Chinese students' lack of oral involvement in the Chinese university classes, and try to come up with some recommendations and strategies to improve it.

### **Literature Review**

There is quite a lot of research about the Chinese students' reticence at different levels of their academic life (school, college

and university), but as mentioned earlier, most of that is about English language learning or in other countries. As a result, the majority of the literature cites language barrier and foreign culture as two of the top reasons. There is not enough literature that investigates the students' reticence in the university classes where the medium of interaction and instructions is Chinese. As a result, the literature about Chinese students' oral involvement in English language classes, and in other countries was also included.

### ***Chinese Students' Lack of Oral Involvement in the Classroom***

A lot of research has been conducted which suggested that Chinese students' classroom interaction was on the lower side (Jackson, 2002; Chen, 2003). Many teachers also claimed that the students were not very active orally in the classroom (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Flowerdew, Miller, & Li, 2000). Mak (2011) conducted research about Chinese students' in-class anxiety about speaking. He found that the Chinese students were not comfortable talking in English classes. They were reluctant and afraid to speak. Malik and Sang (2017) while comparing Chinese and International classes taught in Chinese and English language respectively, found that even when taught in a Chinese university and in the Chinese language, the Chinese students' oral involvement in classes was significantly less. Most of the time, they would prefer silence in the classroom. They spoke only when the teachers asked them to make a comment or answer a question.

### ***Causes behind the Chinese Students' Lack of Oral Involvement in the Classroom***

Cortazzi and Jin (1996) conducted research about the students' learning style in the language classes in China. They said that the environment in the Chinese language classrooms was very formal and disciplined. It revolved around the teacher, and the

students' duty was to sit back and absorb the knowledge. The main emphasis was on passing the examinations through rote learning than developing critical thinking through questioning and classroom discussions. Hammond and Gao (2002) called the interaction in the Chinese classrooms "fragmented" and "linear" (p. 228). They also pointed out that the Chinese classes revolved around the authority (teacher in this case), and the students were supposed to be respectful and obedient.

Nelson (1995) and Ruan (2003) noted the influence of Confucius culture on the Chinese students' communicative behaviour and learning style which stresses on respect for elders, harmony and hard-work. Hammond and Gao (2002) also supported this by saying that in Confucius method of teaching, the teachers were knowledge-bearers and the authority, and the students should follow them. Abubaker (2008) conducted research about the Chinese students who were studying abroad to learn the English language. He found out that the Chinese culture played a very vital role in shaping the moral behaviour of the students in the classroom. He pointed out that the culture in China paid a lot of attention on paying respect to the elders and seniors. Teachers were considered ultimate source of knowledge so a student should learn from them and respect them. Asking questions and speaking much in their presence were signs of breaking those values. He also mentioned that there was a lot of emphasis on harmony and tranquillity in the society. The same rule was also applied to the classroom. Raising questions, challenging and speaking too much could be taken as signs of breaking that harmony in the class. McMahon (2011) conducted a research about the Chinese students' learning and living experiences in the United Kingdom. He found through interviews that even the students were aware of their lack of

interaction in the classroom. They attributed it to the cultural differences and their inability to communicate in English properly. Liu conducted a lot of research about reticence, oral involvement and anxiety of the Chinese students in ESL, EFL and English language classes. In 2005, while investigating the reasons behind Chinese students' lack of interaction in the EFL classrooms, he found out that although the language barrier was the most significant reason; the teachers and the students also pointed towards Chinese cultural influence, personality traits, shyness and the influence of educational system as other important reasons that made students orally less active and interactive in the classroom. The students pointed out Chinese cultural traits that emphasise on "doing things" and modesty instead of "showing off" (Liu, 2005, p. 228). He also agreed to Bond (1996) that the philosophy of Confucius prevented the students from speaking in the classroom because of the "awe of teachers" (Liu, 2005, p. 229). In 2007, he again researched about the anxiety of the Chinese students in the oral English classes (Liu, 2007). He found out that most of the students experienced anxiety while trying to speak English in the classroom. Other than language related reasons, he also pointed out fear of losing face, being ridiculed and afraid to be the centre of attention. Liu and Jackson (2008, 2009) published papers about Chinese students' stress and unwillingness to speak in the classroom. They concluded that the students were quite keen to speak in the classroom, but observed silence due to the language problems and fears of negative reaction upon making mistakes. They also noted that the students were a lot more confident, open and orally active in pair work than when they were the sole focus of the class. Cheng (2000) disagrees with the notion that the Chinese culture and values were the cause behind the students'

reticence in the classroom. He suggested that the reticence of the Chinese students was more due to the language barriers and the teaching methods.

## **Research Methods**

### ***Sample Size and Characteristics***

As the research is about the lack of oral involvement of the Chinese students studying in Chinese universities, the participants were selected from a Chinese university in Beijing. Closed questionnaires and in-depth interviews were employed to collect data. Both teachers and the students were included in the sample to take opinion from both sides. All of them belonged to the education department. It was because the teaching methods and classroom culture for social sciences are quite different from those for pure or life sciences. Random sampling and purposeful sampling techniques were used for quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (interviews) data collection. The students formed different years of master classes with an average age of 24 years and 8 months. All the teachers had taught both Chinese and international classes at the university level. 232 questionnaires were distributed to the Chinese students in the classes. Out of which, 192 were returned (return rate of 82.76%). 10 questionnaires were given to the university teachers, and all of them were returned. As the education department is dominated by girls, 156 out of 192 students who returned the questionnaires (81.25%) were females. Thirteen Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with five Chinese professors and eight students. Student interviewees were selected based on a) their willingness to participate which they showed by consenting for interviews and giving their contact number at the end of the questionnaires; and b) their replies (three students who said that they asked quite a lot of questions, three who said they would stay silent almost all the time and two said that

they would speak moderately during the lecture.

### **Tools and Instruments**

The research used close questionnaires to inquire about the students' oral involvement in the classrooms. They were bilingual (both in Chinese and English language) for a comprehensive understanding for the students who might not be able to understand English properly. A Chinese university student from English department was asked to translate the questionnaire into the Chinese language. Its validity (both content and language translation) was checked by taking expert opinion from two professors from the faculty of education. The professors suggested some changes which were incorporated in the final questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into three parts: background information, questions about the students' oral involvement in the classroom, and the causes of the lack of it. For most of the items, the five-point Likert scale was used. The interviews were semi structures and, in most of the cases, face-to-face. Three students were interviewed through QQ (a popular social media platform in China) as they could not manage time for face-to-face interviews. All the interviews from the professors and three of the students were conducted in English while five students were interviewed in Chinese.

### **Data Analysis**

All the questionnaire data was fed into and analysed using SPSS. As the data was mostly in form of ordinal variables, only descriptive statistical techniques were used. Interviews were transcribed and translated. Marshall and Rossman (2006) model were followed for data analysis. After organizing the data and getting familiar with it, main categories and themes were generated. After that, the process of coding was carried out. Finally, analytical memos were used in order to interpret the data. Due to the limited

number of interviews, the whole process was done manually. Different colour highlighters were used for coding and identifying different themes. As human emotions cannot be fully described in terms of frequencies and keywords, verbatim quotations were also used. Most of the researchers like the use of verbatim quotations as they can convey the message fully and more forcefully (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006).

### **Findings from Questionnaires**

Ten questionnaires were collected from the teachers and 96 (192) from the students. The sample for the teachers appears too small, but it was because the questionnaires were given to only those teachers who had experience of teaching both Chinese and international classes in Chinese and English separately.

### ***Students' Oral Involvement in the Classroom***

The first question asked how much the Chinese students orally responded to the lecture in the classroom. One teacher (10%) and twenty-two students (11.46%) said that the students in the class spoke 'much' whereas six teachers (60%) and eighty-four students (43.75%) thought that the students' interaction was 'normal'. Three (30%) teachers and eighty-six (44.8%) students were of the opinion that the students had 'little' oral interaction in the classroom. As the terms 'much', 'normal' and 'little' are subjected to one's own interpretation and could be vague; a more specific question was asked next. It was to tell how many questions were usually asked by the students (overall) in a Chinese class. The respondents were given five options: 'more than fifteen', 'eleven to fifteen', 'six to ten', 'one to five' and 'none'. Six teachers (60%) and one hundred and sixty four (85.42%) students reported that the students would ask 1 to 5 questions during the whole lecture while two teacher and four students (20% and 2.08%

respectively) said that the students would not ask any question at all during the whole lecture. Two more teachers (20%) and twenty students (10.42%) mentioned that 6 to 10 questions were asked per class while four (2.08%) students said that the students usually asked 11 to 15 questions in a lecture. but none of the teachers said this.

The students were then exclusively asked how many questions they would individually ask in the class to get a clearer idea. Seventy of them (36.45%) said that they would not ask any question in the class. Ninety-eight (51.04%) said that they would ask 1 to 5 questions during a lecture while only six and four students (3.12% and 2.08% respectively) said that they would ask 6 to 10, and 11 to 15 questions per lecture. Focusing on the comparisons of the oral response of the Chinese students with that of international students, the next question inquired them if they thought that the international students would speak more than the Chinese students. The results showed a starkly different response from the teacher and the students. The teachers who had taught both the Chinese and the international classes overwhelmingly thought that it was the case with nine teachers (90%) agreeing to it. The corresponding number for the Chinese students was eighty-four (43.75%). Fifty-six students (29.17%), but only one teacher (10%) disagreed with it, while the rest of the

students said that their level of oral involvement in the classroom was quite similar.

### ***Reasons behind the Chinese Students' Lack of Oral Involvement in the Classroom***

This part of the questionnaire asked the teachers and the students about the causes behind Chinese students' lack of oral involvement in the classroom. Previous school experience and the Chinese beliefs and culture were the most commonly mentioned reasons. Personal or psychological reasons were also considered some of the top reasons by both the teachers and the students with the overwhelming majority of them agreeing to three of its points (shyness, fear of making mistakes, and reluctance to be the first to ask the question). Interestingly, although the literature points towards the teachers and the teaching culture as one of the key reasons behind this (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Hammond & Gao, 2002), most of the students who responded to the questionnaires did not seem to agree. Although seven teachers (70%) agreed that some of the teachers did not like questioning, only thirty-nine students (20.3%) supported this idea. Fifty-four students (28.1%) cited the uninteresting nature of lectures as one of the core reasons. From classroom related issues, only class size was mentioned by a significant number of teachers and the students (Table 1).

**Table No. 1***Questionnaires Findings*

Reasons for the Lack of Oral Involvement in the Classroom	Teachers (10)			Students (192)		
	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
<b>Traditional Chinese Beliefs and Culture</b>						
Due to traditional Chinese beliefs and culture	10 (100%)	-	-	132 (68.8%)	38 (19.8%)	22 (11.4%)
<b>Teacher's Attitude/ Pedagogy</b>						
(Some) teachers do not like questioning	7 (70%)	1 (10%)	2 (20%)	39 (20.3%)	52 (27.1%)	101 (52.6%)
Lectures are not interesting	1 (10%)	6 (60%)	3 (30%)	54 (28.1%)	80 (41.7%)	58 (30.2%)
Questions/ contents are difficult	1 (10%)	5 (50%)	4 (40%)	22 (11.5%)	92 (47.9%)	78 (40.6%)
Questions are not answered properly by the teachers	3 (30%)	2 (20%)	5 (50%)	38 (19.8%)	52 (27.1%)	102 (53.1%)
(Some) teachers do not answer the question in the class	2 (20%)	3 (30%)	5 (50%)	19 (9.9%)	82 (42.7%)	91 (43.4%)
<b>Personal/ Psychological Reasons</b>						
Shy to speak in the class	8 (80%)	1 (10%)	1 (10%)	146 (74%)	30 (15.6%)	16 (8.3%)
Afraid of making mistakes	9 (90%)	1 (10%)	-	136 (70.8%)	46 (24%)	10 (5.2%)
Don't want to be the first to ask the question	9 (90%)	1 (10%)	-	120 (61.5%)	44 (22.9%)	28 (14.6%)
Doing other things (social media, using mobiles etc)	5 (50%)	2 (20%)	3 (30%)	68 (35.4%)	82 (42.7%)	42 (21.9%)
Don't pay attention to the lecture	4 (40%)	2 (20%)	4 (40%)	52 (27.1%)	72 (37.5%)	68 (34.4%)
Due to laziness	-	4 (40%)	6 (60%)	50 (26%)	60 (31.3%)	82 (42.7%)
<b>Classroom Environment/ Culture</b>						
Time of the class might be wasted	1 (10%)	2 (20%)	7 (70%)	36 (18.8%)	40 (20.8%)	116 (60.4%)
Tempo of the class might be broken	2 (20%)	2 (20%)	6 (60%)	46 (24%)	48 (25%)	98 (51%)
Class size is too big	5 (50%)	2 (20%)	3 (30%)	122 (63.5%)	42 (21.9%)	28 (14.6%)
<b>Previous School Influence</b>						
Developed the habit of staying silent during the school year	10 (100)	-	-	154 (80.2%)	26 (13.5%)	12 (6.3%)

**Findings from the Interviews**

The questionnaires were then followed by the interviews which were aimed to investigate the situation more deeply. The main purpose of the interviews was to know how the participants felt about this situation, and what they thought were the causes behind it. It further probed to identify how this situation could be improved.

***Reticent of the Chinese Students in the Classroom***

Most of the students and teachers acknowledged that the reaction and interaction of the Chinese students in the classes were rather on the quieter side, confirming the previous research on this topic (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Tompson &

Tompson, 1996; Malik & Sang, 2017). Most of the participants pointed out that compared to the non-Chinese students; Chinese students were orally less involved in the classroom. Although during interviews, one Chinese student mentioned that the Korean and Japanese students had the same approach in the classroom as the Chinese, "for the Japanese or Korean, they don't like interaction so much, but the students from US and European will." This point was also mentioned by many researchers (Cheng, 2000; Tennant, 2004). An interesting finding in the literature was that the Chinese teachers were more active and interactive with the international students than the Chinese ones (Malik & Sang, 2017). One

professor answering to this point said, “Probably, in international class, I will leave some time for questions because they are so open, so many questions; but in Chinese class, I focus more on the contents (lecture).” This statement stimulates an interesting question, “What should be the role of the teachers? Should they be proactive or reactive?” Most of the teachers pointed out that the situation had improved quite a bit since their time as students. One female teacher said, “They (the Chinese students) have changed. They can express their ideas more now. We (the teachers) have changed.”

#### ***Causes of the lack of oral involvement of the Chinese students in the classroom***

The interviews mainly focused on the causes behind Chinese students’ lack of oral involvement in the university classes. Some of the key themes emerged during the interviews are as follows:

##### ***Chinese Culture and Traditions***

Quite a lot of researchers attribute the Chinese students’ lack of oral involvement to the cultural traits (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996; Bond, 1996; Flowerdew et al., 2000; Jandt, 2003; Abubaker, 2008). Jandt (2003) while talking about the influence of Chinese culture and Confucian thinking upon the communicative behaviour of the Chinese students, mentioned that the philosophy is given by the great Chinese scholar expected and asked the people for peace and calm in society by respecting those who were elder and higher in social ranking. That means that the young ones should not challenge their elders out of respect. The parents tell their children to respect their teachers and elders and follow them. One female student talking about how “inappropriate” it would be to challenge the teacher, said, “No, (it’s) not right. It’s impolite. We respect our elders, teachers. Challenging their knowledge is not good. They might feel embarrassed.”

A female teacher reinforced this argument by saying, “They (the Chinese students) like to respect the elders so they don’t like to ask a lot of questions, you know. They try to come up by themselves. Respect is very important. They follow their elders and teachers. They ask the questions in the class, of course; but they don’t like to be disrespectful.”

Another female teacher put it in these words, “The Chinese students listen more. They are kind of obedient”. This quotation also reveals an interesting point: for Chinese teachers (or some of them, at least), reticence and quietness is a sign of respect as it shows students’ obedience. The roots of this thinking can be found in the Chinese culture where staying silent and listening carefully are signs of respect. Culture and traditions are really important and influential reasons. They shape the students’ behaviour and attitude both directly and indirectly. Schools and teachers (both current and previous one) are culturally influenced and expect the students to observe traditions and moral code. Some of the students’ fears are also embedded in the culture. The culture defines how the students are supposed to behave with the elders, peers and others; what is socially acceptable and what is not. Eventually, it creates an environment in which students are supposed and expected to behave in a certain way.

##### ***Previous School Experiences***

When talking about the culture as an influencing factor, the school culture cannot be ruled out. Habits are mostly shaped during the primary school life of the students (Pressman, Owens, Evans & Nemon, 2014). When the students reach university, their habits are often hardened. Previous school experience seems to be an important factor in shaping the student’s behaviour as one teacher stated,

*“Another part is, many students come from the far,*

*rural areas; perhaps, through all their learning experience before here, they have never interacted too much and already get used to this teaching-learning pattern or style”*

The same opinion was also echoed by the students. Most of them said that in most of the primary and secondary schools, the students were supposed to “sit and listen”. They should answer or speak only when asked by the teacher to do so. According to the students, the pattern is similar throughout China, but of course, stronger in the rural areas where the teachers are not as qualified, trained and skilled as those in the big cities. One professor mentioned the impact of students’ previous school life in these words, “if you often don’t speak then you become silent in the class, one year, two years, three years; then even if you have ideas, you don’t speak”. While talking about previous school culture, one male student said,

*“We were told to sit quietly in class and cram the lessons. Talking will not bring us grades; it will not bring us success. If (we) want success, we should stay quiet, work hard. Our teachers snubbed us if we talked too much or asked many questions in school. They wanted us to focus on learning, not talking. We must learn to read and write. Speaking and listening, not important.”*

Another professor while talking about the teaching styles in primary and secondary schools in China, said, “.....cultural issue, I mean in China. How to say, it’s more moderate. They focus on the task, not on engagement.” This quotation also sheds light on the measures of success in the Chinese education system which relies on tests, rote

learning and written exams. The school teachers, principals, parents and students all pay great attention to those areas as they are the ones which would lead a student to a better, more prosperous academic and practical life.

#### ***Teachers’ Attitude and Teaching Methods***

Although, by and large, most of the teachers and the students did not believe that it was the teachers’ behaviour that shaped this attitude, some said that the teachers in the university tend to be more proactive and encouraging to the international students than the Chinese. One Chinese student, when asked why the international students spoke more freely and frankly in the Chinese university classes, mentioned how the teachers would behave differently in the two classes,

*“Of course, the teacher tended to be nicer to them (international students) because they are not so familiar with Chinese culture, even though the question is very easy and basic; the teacher will answer in a patient way. But for us, we may define some questions as common sense. Even though we don’t understand, we won’t ask. So they (international students) tend to be more active and (have) courage to express them(selves).”*

Another interesting point made by one female student was how some of the teachers would use and present technology (multimedia slides) in a counterproductive way in the classroom, She said,

*“Teachers, I mean not all, some teachers just make slides, full of text and read it like reading from books. It is boring, not interesting. We stay...., sometimes sleep. No questions. Sometimes end of the lecture, some (questions); but often they*



*“speak, speak, speak and then the lesson is over.”*

This quotation reveals how the use of technology can be counterproductive if not used appropriately and expertly. Although, use of multimedia slides is generally considered to increase the students' interest and classroom participation (Atkins-Sayre et al., 1998; Szabo & Hastings, 2000; Apperson, Laws, & Scepansky, 2006), its effectiveness largely depends on how it is prepared and presented. If a teacher simply fills the slide with text (at times, the font is not even visible for the backbenchers), and simply reads from it without questioning and discussion; it could work more like a tranquillizer.

#### ***Class Size***

Class size is a major concern in China. Despite government's utmost efforts, the current infrastructure is not sufficient for the number of students who study there. The situation is particularly alarming in the top ranking Chinese universities as most of the students want to come and study there. In some of the classes, there may be over hundred students during one lecture. More often than not, these were teachers who pointed class size as one of the major factors that would prevent them from becoming more interactive in the classroom. One female teacher expounded the situation in these words,

*“If the class is small, I want them to ask questions; but if the class is huge, I mean more than a hundred students, I just want them to sit and listen; I mean I want, but how can I?”*

#### ***Students' Social and Psychological Fears***

Another common theme about the causes that emerged from the interviews was the students' fear of making mistakes or failing. Mak (2011) also pointed out fears of failures and being embarrassed as some of the causes behind the students' lack of speaking

in the classroom. This fear is begotten by the Chinese concept of losing face. Losing face is a very important concept in the Chinese culture which could cause intense feelings of rage, guilt and shame (Liao, 2007). All the students who were interviewed said that one of the reasons they observed silence was because they were afraid that their questions might be stupid or unreasonable. One student stated that she would have liked to ask questions, but was afraid and shy, “... maybe the question would be wrong, maybe others in the class would not like that”.

This is an important statement. It reveals many causes of reticence amongst the Chinese students including shyness, fear of losing face and others' negative reactions, and lack of confidence and self-belief. Keeping or losing face is a very important concept in China. Fear of losing face (being humbled, seen as stupid or foolish) is considered really negative and bad for one's image and impression. Being in a more traditional society, Chinese students tend to be more careful about their image and pride. This situation seems to present a dilemma for the students. On one hand, they are reluctant to ask questions which might seem to challenge the professors because that might be considered disrespectful; on the other, they are afraid to ask questions which might appear “very easy and basic” as it might make them look stupid or ignorant. This leaves them with very few ‘acceptable’ questions to ask. They are also afraid of wasting the time of the class by asking basic and simple questions. Keeping silent might be a better option than asking questions in such circumstances. The above statement also elucidates the differences between the Chinese and most of the international students in China as the international students do not have to carry the baggage of cultural expectations.

Some students also talked about the stress they have due to numerous

assignments, homework and other study-related activities. One student told how she was usually stressed in the classroom, and would think about her assignments and homework. It is important to note that even at university level, Chinese students have lots of assignments and homework to do. Most of the students follow a 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. schedule in the library and/ or the classroom with very short breaks for basic needs. Even within East Asia where generally students are influenced by the Confucian philosophy and stay silent in the classroom, Chinese students have been reported to have more stress than Koreans or Japanese (Kim et al., 1997). This stress could leave some of them absent-minded or disinterested in the classroom which would leave them sitting idly in the class.

#### **Staying Silent: By Choice or Circumstances?**

Interestingly one point that was mentioned by both the teachers and the students was what “made them (the students)” silent. Reasons like cultural values (respecting, not questioning teachers), previous school experiences, teachers’ behaviour and classroom environment were mentioned that “made them” silent. Even their psychological fears like fear of making mistakes that held them back were based on the socially influenced fear of losing face. Only a very few students said that they “did not want” to speak. Although some students did mention their inclination toward quieter classroom where they could focus on the lecture more carefully, most said that they wanted to speak. It shows that if provided with right environment, encouragement and teaching technique; students would be a lot more likely to speak in the classroom.

#### **Impact of Students’ lack of Oral involvement on their learning**

Finally when asked if the lack of oral response by the students or interaction hampers their learning; the opinion was

divided. Some of the students and the teachers believed that it might not as it depends on students’ own learning style. They said that the Chinese students’ overall performance proved that despite quieter classrooms, it did not affect their learning. Most, on the other hand, was of the opinion that a more interactive class would not only help the students in better understanding of the concepts but also in a better personality and confidence level. One teacher said,

*“Those who stay silent, maybe, they get it, maybe they already got it, maybe they search on the internet, talk to the teachers; but maybe they just leave it.”*

Another teacher mentioned it in these words, “It (keeping silent) affects academically, socially, personally. Professors do not know if you (the student) don’t understand that (the lecture).” Literature also supports this idea that the classes, in which students orally participate more actively, produce better performance (Smith, 1977).

#### **Breaking the Chinese Students’ Silence in the University Classes**

It is important to repeat that when questioned, the students expressed their desire to speak, but were fearful due to the reasons mentioned above. The reasons mostly stemmed from the traditional Chinese beliefs and cultures which either affected the students’ attitude directly (breaking the harmony in the class, challenging the teachers, speaking too much, fear of losing face) or indirectly (teachers’ behaviour and previous/ current school culture shaped by the traditional culture and belief). Culture and traditions are something which changes slowly and naturally. They involve so many factors and players that influencing them would need a lot of effort and time. Even then, a forced change could fail to bring the desired results. Also as some teachers noted, the oral involvement of

the students in the classroom was getting much better these days. Things are likely to improve with the passage of time albeit at a slow (and natural) pace, but what are the things that can be controlled and done more easily to help speed up this process? Although teachers or teaching methodology was not pointed out to be one of the top reasons, it can be the most important agents of change. They should be more proactive and motivate the students to be more participatory and orally active.

Questioning is one of the basic steps for participatory classroom or active learning. They can improve the students' interest, and keep them active in the classroom (Gall, 1970; Dillon, 1983; Bonwell and Eison, 1991; Silberman, 1996), but this strategy has to be used properly. Malik and Sang (2017) showed that most of the Chinese teachers followed a certain pattern to question the students during their lectures. They would give the lecture, and ask the questions at the end of it. It allows the students to conveniently remain inactive and asleep during the whole lecture. During the interviews, one male teacher said that he would never allow the students to "get lazy" during the lecture by continuously asking short questions. If the teachers ask short questions from the students throughout the lecture, it would keep the students active and involved. Moreover, instead of allowing some students to dominate the question-answer activity, the teacher should randomly ask for opinions or questions from other students as well.

Another point that has been discussed earlier is the improper use of multimedia slides by some teachers. Most of the university classrooms in China are equipped with modern equipment (computers, sound system and multimedia projectors etc) and almost all the teachers use powerpoint slides during their lectures. This use of technology has proven to

increase the interest of the students in the classroom learning (Atkins-Sayre et al., 1998; Szabo & Hastings, 2000; Apperson, Laws, & Scepanisky, 2006; Apperson, Laws, & Scepanisky, 2008) but if technology is not used properly, it can be counterproductive (Young, 2004; Levin & Wadmany, 2008). Some teachers were reported to use technology improperly. Some students complained the some of the teachers would simply make "slides, full of text" and "simply read from it". Young (2004) also mentioned dull presentations where the teacher would simply put all of his or her notes on the slide and then read them in the classroom. During the interviews, the students said that they were most interested and active when the slides contained keywords or bullet points; and then the teacher explained and discussed them. Literature also tells that use of bars, graphs and bullet points usually grab students' attention (Apperson, Laws, & Scepanisky, 2008). Use of questioning during the powerpoint slides based lecture also greatly increases its effectiveness.

Some teachers argued that despite their desire, they cannot move to participatory classes due to the large class size. It is a legitimate issue which is out of teachers' control, but the literature provides with some strategies and techniques to overcome this issue. Gleason (1986) suggests the teacher to avoid standing at one end of the class (behind the dice) and instead move around or stand in the middle of it. It would create a sense of closeness with the students. It is also suggested that the teacher should learn the names of the students, and use the names to address them. In this way, the students will realize that the teachers are aware of their presence, and be more conscious. The teacher can also use their names to randomly ask different students to give their opinion/ ask the questions. Frederick (1986) suggests group discussions

for large size class. Such discussion will allow those students who lack the confidence to build it in small groups before mustering up enough courage to speak in front of the whole class. Liu and Jackson (2009) also pointed out that the Chinese students were a lot more confident while discussing in the pairs or small groups than when they would be the sole focus of the class. Questioning is something that can be used even in big classes. Instead of starting a debate or asking long questions, teachers may ask short questions from the students throughout the lecture, most preferably asking their opinion about the subject matter. It would give the students more freedom to speak as they could say what they believe rather than worrying about the information being right or wrong.

Most of the students stated to have the inclination to speak but were hesitant to do so. The role of teachers is again vital over here. Teachers are often considered role models for the students (Lumpkin, 2008), and they can influence the students immensely. The teachers themselves realize the students' fears and mentioned it in both the questionnaires and the interviews. By and large, Chinese students are more stressed than their peers in East Asia (Kim, 1997). If the students are reluctant to speak due to the fear, awe and uncertainty (Liu, 2005, 2007), or are stressed; teachers must come up and help them get out of this. They must be more proactive and positive in the classroom, realizing the students' issues and fears. Chickring and Gamson (1987) presented seven principals for effective and good practices in teaching. Despite being old, those principals are still very effective. Some of them are about improving teachers-to-students, and students-to-students interaction. They are: giving prompt feedback, and using active learning techniques. During the interviews, one female teacher admitted that some teachers

are likely to be more active and interactive in international classes as they ask more questions. This statement stimulates a question "Should teachers be proactive or reactive?" A good teacher should not sit back and react to the students' behaviour, but be proactive and try to take initiatives in helping them to improve (Scharmann, 2005). They can make their slides and lectures more interesting; keep asking questions from the students throughout the lecture, and try to help the students in gaining confidence.

It is really important to note that focusing on the teachers in this whole section does not mean that they are the only ones to blame or even one of the biggest reasons to blame. Actually, by and large, the students did not say that it was they or their teaching that caused the lack of students' oral involvement in the classroom; but the teachers can be the most important agents of change. Even in a truly student-centred class; teachers remain one of the most influential actors. In those settings, even when they are not controlling the classroom activities, they are regulating and setting the direction. They do not dictate things but are instrumental in ensuring that the class, its discussion and activities follow the desired directions and yield good results. Teachers are highly qualified and knowledgeable to know the importance of the students' oral involvement in the classroom, and they are in a position to motivate and influence them. Above all, compared to culture, social values, or other factors; they are easier to change and control. Their role becomes really vital in a country where schools and the students have not fully embraced the concept of student-centred learning. Chinese education culture is still in a transitional period, moving away from teacher-centred, monologue-based traditional methods of teaching to student-centred, more interactive one. Even the students are not prepared for this. Teachers

have to take a more proactive role at this stage for a 'teachers'-driven, student-centred learning'. It is like a boulder at a hilltop. It remains stuck over there for centuries, hard to move. Once the boulder starts moving, it will increase its speed and impact; but in the beginning, teachers will have to push it really hard, made deliberate efforts.

### **Conclusion**

The paper looks into the reasons behind the Chinese students' lack of oral involvement in the university classes. It goes on to give recommendations to improve this situation. Both teachers and the students were asked to fill the questionnaires and were interviewed. Chinese culture and social values (very high emphasis on respect, harmony and humbleness), students' previous school experiences, their personal and psychological reasons (shyness, fears of losing face, being pointed out and making mistakes etc), and class size emerged as the most prominent reasons behind this. Although teachers or their teaching methods were not mentioned by the most of the students, some teacher did mention that some of their peers did not like questioning. Some students also mentioned improper use of powerpoint slides as one of the reasons. The biggest reasons cited by both the teachers and the students were culture, traditions, previous school experiences and the students' social and psychological fears. Based on the interviews and literature, the paper then recommends some strategies to promote classroom interaction in the Chinese university classes. It is realized that at this transitional stage, Chinese school and universities are trying to move towards student-centred learning. The problem is that by and large, the students have not developed and adopted the skills and capabilities to drive the classroom interaction and activities at this stage. There is a need for a 'teacher-driven, student-centred learning' for this transitional period.

Teachers hold a very important and significant position in the Chinese education culture. They are parent-figures who are looked upon for inspirations and influences. They were not pointed out as one of the core reasons behind the problem, but they can be the most vital agent to promote and improve students' oral participation in the classroom. The paper suggests teachers take initiatives for improving the classroom culture, and motivate the students to be more orally active in the classrooms. They should better prepare the powerpoint slides and involve the students in the process through questions and discussion. Teachers must ask questions throughout the lecture rather than following the typical pattern of asking questions at the end of the lecture. They should also take the opinion of and ask the questions from the students who normally do not volunteer to answer or discuss. In this way, the students are likely to listen to the lecturer more carefully and be prepared to answer, knowing that they could be asked to speak at any time. To overcome the issue of large class size, the teachers could move in the classroom during the lecture or stand in the middle of the classroom. Wireless microphones and laser pointers can be used to overcome some issues that might arise from it. Finally, as the teachers are parent-figures and role models in China, they should use their position of influence to encourage the students to break those social and psychological barriers of fears and hesitation. In this way, the Chinese university classes can become a lot more active and interactive despite existing social, cultural, school and infrastructure issues.

### **Limitation and Further Research**

This paper investigates the Chinese students' reticence in the university classes. The data is collected from only one university in Beijing. The university is situated in the capital and is one of the top universities in China. Some of the top teachers and student

are part of it. As a result, it can be assumed that the confidence level, subject knowledge and communication skills of both the teachers and the students would be much better than the most in China, and the situation of students' classroom oral interaction is likely to be even less promising in most of the other universities. Yet, it would have been much better to gather data from different parts of the country to see if this trend is persistent in different parts of China.

Based on the literature and the feedback from the teachers and the students, the paper gives some recommendations to improve the situation. It is suggested to conduct further research with control and experimental group to see how effective and pragmatic those recommendations are.

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