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Chinese student perceptions of in-class participation and its assessment
A qualitative approach in a Sino-British institution

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Abstract: Decreasing public funding in the UK and an increasing ability to pay for higher education abroad lead to increasing numbers of Chinese students in British classrooms. At the same time, existing research claims that Chinese students are particularly shy and reluctant to participate in class discussions. For assuring the standard of learning experiences of local as well as Chinese students, it is thus important to better understand Chinese students’ perception of in-class participation. We explore the case of a Sino-British business school which introduced the assessment of class participation. We use in-depth interviews to understand student-related perceptions. In our preliminary investigation, we find that (1) students feel that their personality and prior experiences may contribute; (2) Chinese students may perceive that simply listening to the class discussion is as beneficial to their learning as contributing; and that (3) group work is an effective way to engage them in class participation; however, evaluation should consist of group rather than individual assessment. A future path for this work in progress is depicted.

Key words: China, students, participation, assessment, qualitative
INTRODUCTION

Student participation in class has been shown to increase learning quality (Weaver & Qi, 2005). However, existing research suggests that Chinese students are more reluctant to participate actively in class discussions (Biggs, 1991). Given the increasing economic relevance of China for the world economy and of Chinese students for the financial performance of higher education institutions (Lamb and Currie, 2011; Tait, 2010), e.g. in the UK, the US and Australia, it thus seems important to better understand Chinese students’ in-class participation.

Existing research on class participation and Chinese students’ related attitudes has been based mostly on quantitative approaches (e.g. Dallimore et al., 2006; 2010) and has explored student attitudes in a more general manner. However, when active class participation was introduced in a Sino-British institution in China, students demonstrated different levels of willingness and different attitudes towards this new teaching method. It is therefore instructive to explore Chinese students’ perceptions of in-class participation and its assessment (which might influence their level of motivation and their participation), as well as the self-reported effects of participation on learning. We are thus conducting a qualitative study in order to overcome some of the limitations of the existing work in this area. We explore student views on a specific case of class participation assessment at a Sino-British institution. We thus obtain an in-depth understanding of Chinese students’ perceptions and suggestions resulting from their reflection on experiences in a specific class which they had taken in a previous semester.

In this paper we aim to understand Chinese students’ perceptions of in-class participation and its evaluation and its links with learning outcomes. We present a qualitative study involving
13 in-depth interviews with Chinese students and identify three areas of findings. Finally, we discuss the integration of additional interviews and the next steps to further improving this developmental submission.

METHODS

Approach

We undertook a qualitative approach to better understand the perceptions of Chinese students at a Sino-British business school. The school offers programs at undergraduate (4 year) and graduate (1 year) level. It recently introduced the assessment of in-class participation (referred to as ‘active class participation’ or ACP) to supplement the existing assessment formats of coursework and exam. Where in-class participation is assessed, it contributes 20% of the students’ final mark. The study was undertaken after the first semester that this assessment format had been introduced in selected modules at the school, and we selected informants who had taken at least one ACP module, i.e. one module in which in-class participation was assessed.

In order to identify students’ perceptions, we conducted in-depth interviews, lasting 30-60 minutes each, with 13 students (see Table 1). All participants are Chinese. We began each interview by asking students to share their personal background and descriptions of typical ACP procedures in class. Next, we asked them to state their perceptions of this newly-applied teaching method, which might indicate factors influencing implementation of ACP or its potential effects on students. Preferences for teaching methods (e.g., traditional lectures versus ACP) as well as for corresponding marking systems were also covered in the
interviews. With all these questions, we aimed to identify nuanced effects of in-class participation and its assessment from the Chinese students’ reflections.

Table 1: Overview of informants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Year 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Year 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabel</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Year 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nate</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Year 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Graduate¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Year 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Year 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Year 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ocean</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Year 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Year 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Year 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Year 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Year 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data treatment

All interviews were conducted in Chinese and recorded with the informants’ consent. They were then transcribed and translated into English. Two Chinese researchers were involved in the process of transcription and translation in order to assure the functional equivalence of the translated transcripts (Johnson, 1998). When analyzing the translated transcripts, a coding scheme evolved from the texts and was found to represent the three major themes of the interviews. Both researchers agreed with regard to the general three categories:

¹ Alex graduated after the first semester in which ACP was assessed.
(1) Perceptions and Feelings, (2) Learning, and (3) Group and Individual Assessment. The interview statements were then labeled, and the very limited number of cases that did not result in agreement were discussed. A Chinese and a European researcher cooperated in the data analysis in order to reduce cultural bias of the attributions and to assure appropriate understanding where the English and Chinese language did not allow for precise translation (e.g. 害怕 – hàipà and 恐惧 – kǒngjù can both be translated as ‘fear’; however the latter is substantially stronger in expression). The resulting findings are presented below.

FINDINGS

According to the translated transcripts, interviewees hold different opinions of in-class discussion and its assessment. These perceptions allow a better understanding of some of the relations that connect the specific setting of class participation and its assessment with response patterns that are typically observed in a Chinese context. Some of these points also indicate impacts on Chinese students’ learning behaviors and their understanding of the role of discussion in their learning processes. We organize our findings around three main aspects: perceived relevance of Chinese students’ (1) personality and experience on their participation; and (2) understanding of learning through class participation; and (3) perceptions of the fairness of providing group versus individual assessment of group discussions.

Perceived impact of Chinese students’ personality and experience on in-class participation

Almost all informants mentioned that one factor influencing their in-class participation was their personality, which might affect their emotions when answering questions.
Isabel: (...) Those students who are assertive or energetic will definitely participate actively, share their own ideas and argue with others. For someone more neutral, like me, it might not be the case that I actively participate. If the class is full of assertive students, it might be more interactive and rich in new and innovative ideas.

Isabel mentions assertiveness as a personal trait of her peers and claims that this trait enhances class discussion and thus provides a more interactive atmosphere in the class. Linda, however, points out that her introvert personality hinders her participation, and she mentions that this introversion is transformed into perceived pressure through the assessment:

Linda: Of course, I usually would not like to express my ideas in front of others, and I’m quite quiet. Even though I want to answer questions, I am afraid that I cannot answer them well. After all, the mark needs to be recorded, and this puts pressure on me.

Besides the relatively stable connection between personality, in-class participation and its assessment, students also suggest a more dynamic perspective. While Linda felt that her introvert personality might prevent her from participating actively, other informants argued that similar experiences actually helped them to overcome this difficulty to some degree.

Isabel: At first, I felt nervous. But when you begin to talk about the topic, you forget that.

Whether or not the participation is being assessed, when teachers ask you questions, you will always be nervous.

Researcher: Are you nervous or shy when speaking in front of a group of students?

Isabel: For me, it depends. I used to host an English program for a student society, something which could make me quite nervous. When others are looking at you, you always feel a little nervous.
Here Isabel seems to be suggesting that her reactions are contingent, and based on the environment in which she is speaking publicly. Alex also mentions the idea that environment plays a role. But Alex’s comment goes on to highlight the related issue of experience, and the way in which increasing familiarity with classroom expectations can shape students’ reactions. He reports on the change in his anxiety level from year 1 to year 2 of his studies.

Alex: *There were times when I was too nervous to speak, and I would be shaking, especially in Year One. In my Year One, when I was beginning to speak for the first time, I was so nervous because I was unfamiliar with the environment. From Year 2, I wasn’t as nervous.*

*Perceived impact of in-class participation on student learning*

An underlying assumption of assessing class participation is that participating in class is an important learning experience that leads to the acquisition of important business competences (Christensen, 1991; Elmore, 1991). The question of how Chinese students perceive learning in the context of assessed in-class discussions emerged as the second thematic content area from the interview data.

Ann: *I think this kind of teaching method burdens the students. But actually, to some degree it helps me to learn, and I feel that [the taught module] is quite interesting. Even now, I can still remember what we have been taught in the module…*

While Ann only mentions an abstract burden and connects it with the resulting learning outcome, evidenced by remembering course content a few months after the semester, Rebecca explicitly mentions interactive methods such as role plays as the basis for learning.
She also emphasizes the importance of reflection:

Rebecca: ...Especially in the seminars, we have role plays and conduct mock negotiations, which might enhance our understanding. And the conclusion can provide reflections on the content after the lectures. It also leaves an impression and helps me remember.

The main effect described by most informants is that the assessment of in-class participation aids in remembering class content.

Nick: I have a better memory of what has been discussed in the lectures. (...) But for [the taught module], we participate a lot. And even after the exams, I can still remember what has been taught in the lectures. This is not only beneficial for preparing for exams, but it also helps me to improve myself.

Nick explicitly mentions participation and links this to remembering course content. Besides that, he establishes the specific link to better exam performance. This aspect is particularly important because existing research has identified Chinese students as very achievement-oriented learners (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; Biggs, 1996; Samuelowicz, 1987; Volet & Tan-Quigley, 1999). However, this aspect is also more controversial than the view on long-term retention of content:

Tom: (...) But actually I think whether or not I participate in class, what I write in final exam is just similar: ...

A further issue is mentioned by Isabel:

Isabel: (...) Others’ thoughts might bring a kind of inspiration, which might indicate that my thoughts can be improved or there can be ideas like this. It might extend the lecture compared to situations when there is only one teacher speaking. But I am the one whose
Isabel thinks that it is others’ contributions that help her to learn, rather than her own new ideas or her own engagement in the discussion. It thus remains unclear whether the learning effects from ACP result from the learners’ own participation in class, form the increased breadth of viewpoints presented in class, or, even in a more limited fashion, from the increased pre-discussion preparation at home.

*Impact of individual and group assessment on perceived fairness of assessment*

When it came to the question of whether the attribution of individual marks is fair, Linda agreed, indicating that someone who has good ideas may present these and can thus earn a high mark. By contrast, students with lower capabilities cannot contribute actively and thus receive lower marks. However, individual marking for group discussion still presents a quandary. This is particularly relevant because individual contributions may not be appreciated in the collectivist Chinese culture (Ho and Crookall, 1995), a point which has been mentioned in the literature as a reason for the silence in Chinese classrooms. In this context, the question of whether class participation should be assessed as individual or group participation gains special relevance. In the context investigated, this is particularly pertinent because students had been given class time to discuss questions in groups of five before starting the whole class discussion. Under these conditions, the issue of whether a contribution is attributed to an individual or to the entire group becomes central. Students hold various opinions on this issue.

Generally, those who think they are good at answering questions or have better performance
than others might prefer to be marked individually. Nevertheless, Isabel’s example shows that some informants are still aware of various tensions:

   Isabel: *I think marking for individuals might be better. But I immediately I see the problem with this. We always discuss first, and then one student answers the questions. There is always one student presenting, but he includes his own ideas and those from other group members. If another student’s ideas are appreciated, the owner of these ideas might feel uncomfortable to some extent.*

Alex preferred being marked as a group but with presenters being selected randomly by the professor, as this would force every student to contribute and to shoulder responsibility.

   Alex: *For myself, I prefer [being marked as] group. For a discussion, everyone should contribute something. ... (...)*

   Researcher: *Will the presenter in a group always be the person who is good at speaking English?*

   Alex: *That’s the reason why marks should be given to the whole group. When marking individuals, the talkative ones will speak all the time, while other students might not have so many chances. But when marking the group, the one who likes to speak up in class will also lead his small group discussion, and this is the chance for him to practice leadership. And he might have the chance to push the silent students to speak. (...)*

   Researcher: *But after the small group discussion, those who speak good English and are more active might summarize the group’s ideas to gain a good mark for the whole group. Would this assure equal chances?*

   Alex: *If I am the teacher, and the marking system is like what I have just described, then I*
would not let the group decide by themselves. I would roll a die to ensure that every student has the chance to speak up – and accordingly, they also need to prepare for it.

Alex’s position connects to existing work pointing out that English language competence needs to be taken into account (Majid et al., 2010; Man-Fat, 2005). He further highlights the possibility that small group discussions prior to whole class debate might allow those with better language skills to absorb the small group knowledge and to present it in class. However, Alex also suggests that the discussion and assessment process in each small group is only as good as its weakest member – this would thus encourage the group members to support each other’s learning.

**Outlook**

In order to further deepen understanding of these phenomena and to make the preliminary findings presented more profound, we aim to add eight further interviews with those students who performed well / badly in class participation but badly / well in course work and the final exam. In particular, this should improve our understanding of student learning and of the effects of management education. For obtaining an in-depth understanding of cultural differences and of how Chinese students react in a classroom environment with non-Asian students, we could further integrate 12 in-depth interviews with 6 Chinese and 6 international students who studied together in a master in entrepreneurship program.

At the workshop, we particularly seek feedback with regard to the theoretical anchoring of our work and how to connect this work to Management Learning.
References


