More Than Meets the Eye
Reasons Behind Asian Students' Perceived Passivity In The ESL/EFL Classroom

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Abstract

This paper investigates several common alleged stereotypes related to the Asian learners in terms of reticence and passivity in the classroom and it reviews the factors offered as explanations for the perceived reticence and passivity. In addition to acknowledging the part culture plays in this behavioral profile, we have argued that factors other than culture i.e., students related and teacher issues play no less a role in the way Asian students interact in the ESL/EFL classroom. Finally, this paper summarizes some of the pedagogical implications of this stereotyping.

Keywords: passive, Stereotype, second language learning, reticence.

Introduction

In recent ESL/EFL literature, Asian (especially East Asian) learners of English as a foreign/second language have been arguably reported as reticent and passive. The most

common allegations are that these students are reluctant to participate in classroom discourse; they are unwilling to give responses; they do not ask questions, they are passive and over- dependent on the teacher (Braddock et al., 1995; Cortazzi & Jin 1996; Jones et al 1993; Tsui, 1996).

While some researchers (e.g., Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Littlewood & Liu, 1996,) have challenged these allegations, more interested researchers have chosen to explore the factors behind such alleged behavior of the Asian students. By resorting to socio -cultural interpretations of the Asian societies, many researchers (e.g., Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Turner & Hiraga, 1996) generalized that these shortcomings on the part of the Asian students result from certain cultural attributes of Asian societies. It is perhaps relatively easier to establish whether or not Asian students are reticent and passive learners than to explain why *some* Asian learners have indeed been observed to be quieter than desired.

In this paper, I will review the reasons offered as responsible for this behavioral profile of the Asian students and I will report the findings of existing studies as evidence against the alleged behavior to support my argument that the reasons attributed for the passivity of the Asian students goes beyond the cultural interpretations. In fact, factors that are commonly held responsible may be deeper and more diverse than meets the eye. I will argue that a number of issues related to both teachers and students have a lot to do in the circumstances where behavior of reticence and passivity is indeed observed. Finally, I will summarize the implications this stereotyping might have on teaching learning as a whole.

What is Stereotype?

Stereotype is a belief about an individual or a group, based on the idea that all people in a certain group will act the same way. Stereotypes are often based on superficial observations and experiences which reflect preconceived ideas. When someone says that all members of a particular race, religion, ethnic group, gender or other group are "lazy," "rude," "cheap," "criminal," or "good at math," he or she is expressing a stereotype. All groups have individuals who demonstrate these characteristics.

To label an entire group based on the actions of a few of its members is to stereotype. Stereotypic representations have been broadly defined as cognitive structures that contain a perceiver's knowledge, beliefs, and expectancies about a social group (Hamilton & Troiler, 1986, cited in Spencer-Rodgers, 2001). According to Spencer-Rodgers, (2001), stereotypes have been conceptualized as culturally shared beliefs about the attributes that characterize a group of people (consensual, cultural, or social stereotypes) and in terms of unique, personal beliefs about the attributes of a group (individual, personal, or idiosyncratic stereotypes) (p.642).

Thus, stereotypes are often based on superficial observations that reflect preconceived ideas. Stereotypes tend to judge a group of people from the performance of an individual.

Asian Students' Alleged Behavior

In order to keep pace with the globalization in which English is playing a crucial role, Asian countries notably China, Japan, and South Korea have put a lot of emphasis on teaching English.

Firstly, as English is increasingly becoming an international language, these countries have undertaken reform in the teaching of English as a foreign or second language, which in turn has generated more and more research interest in ESL/EFL practices in these countries and regions (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Li, 1998; Littlewood, 1999; LoCastro, 1996; Park & Oxford, 1998).

One common and recurring finding in these studies is that more often than not Asian learners of English are generally reticent and passive learners (Braddock et al., 1995; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Turner & Hiraga, 1996; Tsui, 1996).

Secondly, an ever- increasing number of Asian students is coming to the Western universities to pursue higher studies. These students are also reported to have been found as passive and deficient in critical thinking (Fox, 1994). Braddock et al. (1995, cited in Jones, 1999) in their survey at Macquarie University in Sydney found that 60% of the staff respondents viewed Asian students as quiet and inactive in class and reported much better communication with Australian, American, and European students. Cortazzi & Jin (1996) asked 15 highly experienced Western teachers of English working in Chinese universities about the strong and weak points of Chinese students' learning styles. In the estimation of those teachers, on the strong side, Chinese students were diligent, persistent, thorough and friendly; extraordinarily good at memorizing; had a strong desire to learn English well and so forth.

However, on the other hand, these Western teachers reported that Chinese students were not active in class; they were unwilling to work in groups; they preferred whole-class work or individual work (to group-work or pair-work); and they were shy.

Flowerdew & Miller (1995) in their study on the notion of culture in foreign language university lectures in Hong Kong reported that expatriate lecturers were frustrated with students' reluctance to give their opinions, even when asked. They speculated that this lack of enthusiasm to participate in the classroom interaction might result from a negative attitude which has something to do with the local and academic cultures that students operate in.

Exploring the differential patterns of participation of Asian and non-Asian university ESL students in the United States, Sato (1982) found a disproportionate distribution of talk in favor of non-Asians. She disclosed that her Asian subjects tended to have fewer turns; bid for turns less often, and receive fewer personal solicits from the teacher.

In Turner & Hiraga's (1996, cited in Liu & Littlewood, 1997) study of the effect of different cultural assumptions on academic tutorials, it was found that Japanese students in Britain appeared passive and unwilling to engage in dialectic and analytic discourse in tutorials. Turner & Hiraga suggest that Japanese academic culture, which values the demonstration rather than transformation of knowledge, could be the cause of students' passive behavior.

Tsui (1996) asked a group of 38 foreign teachers working in secondary schools in Hong Kong to react on their own teaching and identify a specific problem that might form the basis for classroom action research. Over 70% of the teachers identified getting more student oral response as one of their major problems. These teachers described their students as "passive", "quiet", "shy", "unwilling to speak English" and so forth.

In addition to these findings from empirical studies, other researchers have voiced their speculations about Asian learners' characteristics based on their studies of socio-cultural aspects of Asian societies.

For example, Littlewood (1999) predicts that East Asian students' reticence might have to do with collectivism which might deter them from engaging in argumentative discussion. Therefore, in open classroom, Littlewood concludes that East Asian students will be reluctant to "stand out" by expressing their views or raising questions, particularly if this might be perceived as expressing public disagreement.

Biggs (1996) summarizes some Western misperceptions of the so-called Confucian-heritage cultures, one of which is that "overseas Asian students typically take a low profile, rarely asking questions or volunteering answers, let alone making public observations or criticisms of course content" (p.47).

Interpretations of Reticence and Passivity

The cause of Asian students' alleged passive learning behavior is often attributed by the researchers to the unique culture of learning, which is deeply rooted in the traditional values about education in Asia. As the most common interpretation, the Confucian influences have been frequently cited in the literature as the main cause of the perceived reticence of not only Chinese students but also students in other Asian countries.

According to Littlewood & Liu (1996), like Asian values, the biggest cliché about Asia today, Confucian values have become a convenient explanation for observed or

behavioral trait. Scollon & Scollon (1994, cited in Liu & Littlewood ,1997) state that the Confucian teacher-student relationship does not encourage questioning in class because "questioning might be thought of as saying that the teacher had not taught well because there were still unanswered questions" (p.17). It is believed that in Confucian times (and a long time after that period) there was great respect from the pupils for the knowledgeable teacher. Passivity and reticence were indications of respect for the teacher. It was not only acceptable but also desirable for students to listen to and obey the teacher. Challenging the teacher by asking questions was not believed to be an accepted practice.

> ". . . consciousness and recognition of teacher authority has been a significant aspect of Chinese traditional values since Confucius and a strong element in Chinese approaches to learning." (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996, p. 179).

This argument about teacher authority, however, does not conform to the Confucian doctrine (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Confucius did advocate respect for knowledge and knowledgeable persons. This is not at issue. However, the fact is that respecting knowledge and knowledgeable teachers does not necessarily mean students should be compliant and passive to the teacher. This is manifested in Confucius's well-known saying: "*shi bu bi xian yu di zi; di zi bu bi bu ru shi*", which means "the teacher does not always have to be more knowledgeable than the pupil; and the pupil is not necessarily always less learned than the teacher".

Confucius had another saying which is known in virtually every household in China "*san ren xing, bi you wo shi*", meaning "among any three persons, there must be one who can be my teacher". Obviously Confucius was not supportive of the idea that the pupils should blindly accept whatever the teacher imparts. Traditional Chinese education also greatly values "challenging".

This is seen in one motto frequently recommended for Chinese students - "*Qin xue hao wen*", meaning "a good student should study hard and always be ready to ask questions". This was also evidenced by Cortazzi & Jin (1996) from Chinese students' perception of being a good student. A fairly high percentage of students mentioned that a good student is active and asks questions in class. He 'should not only learn everything from the teacher but create things through his learning'. 'He learns actively, not passively.' 'If there is anything which can't be understood he will raise his hand immediately and discuss it with his teacher.'(p.191)

Firstly, Liu & Littlewood (1997) expressed a similar view by analyzing the Chinese term for "knowledge". In Chinese, the term for "knowledge" is made up of two characters. One is *xue* (to learn) and the other is *wen* (to ask). This means that enquiring and questioning are central to the quest for knowledge. Therefore, respect for teachers does not seem to be a major cause for some Asian students' reticence in class, and the notion

that Asian students are not inclined to challenge the teacher's authority for this reason does not hold much ground.

Secondly, a number of Western professors in the study of Ferris & Tagg (1996) view Asian students' difficulties with academic listening and speaking tasks, emanating from cultural inhibition or shyness. It is argued that Asian cultures generally value collectivism and discourage individual self-expression, creativity, and critical thinking; whereas Western culture displays the opposite characteristics (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991, Flowerdew & Miller, 1995). However, these perceptions seem to be over generalizations because collectivism does not preclude questioning and the small samples on which these claims are based do not represent the whole Asian culture.

Thirdly, Cheng (2000, p. 441) poses two crucial questions in this regard: If cultural differences between the East and the West cause reticence for Asian students, does it mean all Asian countries share the same culture, which typically causes passivity? Or does it mean Asian countries do have different cultures, but these different cultures coincidentally all cause inhibition for language learners? How can all Asians have same attitude and different cultures? None of the answer to these questions is affirmative.

The other factor, namely anxiety or fear of making mistakes which is frequently cited as a cause of the perceived reticence and passivity is also allegedly related to certain aspects of Eastern culture, such as the desire to be right and perfect and fear of losing face (Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Jones, 1999).

It is true that a high degree of anxiety is likely to have a negative effect on second language learning (Ellis, 1994) in general and speaking it in particular. However, there is a gap in literature to evidence that learners' degree of anxiety is related to their local culture.

When analyzing the causes behind Hong Kong students' anxiety in the classroom, Tsui (1996) in his study concludes that the degree of anxiety in the language classroom largely depends on the teacher's strategies (e.g., questioning techniques, wait times allocation of turns). Successful strategies minimize language learning anxiety and unsuccessful strategies aggravate language learning anxiety.

As a possible reason for this behavioral pattern of the Asian students, Ballard & Clanchy (1991) have come up with a continuum of cultural attitudes to knowledge ranging from "conserving" to "extending". According to this concept, it is the reproductive approach to learning, which favors strategies of memorization and rote learning and positively discourages critical questioning of either the teacher or the text, is the dominant tendency in formal education in much of Southeast Asia and other Asian countries.

According to Ballard (1996), Buddhism and Confucius based societies respect for the teacher is a duty which follows those of respect for the Buddha, the law and the monks, the dynamics of the classrooms are shaped by the "impossibility of questioning, much less contradicting the teacher. In Japan the subordinate role of the student overrides any attempt to develop independent or individual views" (p.154). In these societies "the classroom is not a venue for critical questioning or argument." This differs from the current Western education system which Ballard & Clanchy (1991) summarizes as:

> "…even at the primary level, the dominant tendency is to urge students toward an ultimately speculative approach to learning, to encourage them to question, to search for new ways of looking at the world around them."(p.23)

This difference in education system is further discussed by Ballard & Clanchy (1991) with their comparison of Asian and Western college teachers. In the West college teachers assume that it is their duty to develop their students as independent learners, with the competence 'to analyze', 'to question', 'to criticize', 'to evaluate'. They want their students to apply these capacities across the whole range of their learning. They want them to adopt:

> "a critical stance not merely to the issues, points of view, and evidence raised in the course of lectures and class discussions, but equally to the theories, data and conclusion offered by the foremost scholars in the field. From their first year at college students are trained to consider critically everything they read or hear; it is not presumptuous they are told, for a student to raise questions about the wisdom of the respected scholars –it is mandatory."(p.23)

Knowledge, according to Ballard & Clanchy (1991), is never absolute. It must continually be questioned and challenged if it is to continue to be valid. In the East the traditions of scholarship attest to knowledge as wisdom and it is the student's duty to learn knowledge, to acquire this wisdom as it is handed by wise and respected teachers. The teachers' duty, on the other hand, is to impart a base of knowledge fully and clearly to their students. Between such reciprocal roles and duties there is no scope for critical questioning and analysis, or for reevaluation leading to new conclusions.

Leki (1997) is critical about the view Ballard & Clanchy (1991) hold about oriental attitude towards knowledge and learning. Leki comments that this kind of cross-cultural explanation for behavioral differences "risks turning ESL students into cardboard characters whose behavior is simply determined by cultural norms and who has no individual differences or subtleties obscured by these behaviors" (p. 239).

However, empirical studies by Stephens (1997) indicated that Ballard & Clanchy's (1991) views are over generalized and oversimplified. The participants in Stephens' (1997) study did not accept whatever was 'handed by wise and respected teachers and

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according to one participating Asian teacher "….still there are people who are very critical and outspoken. It's difficult to generalize the attitude of the 'we'" (p.119). In instances of disagreement with their teachers, students' silence does not necessarily indicate respect for the teacher. As another participant comments, "it may also be that those who keep silence are not quite sure or quite understand what the supervisor said" (p. 119). Yet another participant teacher comments in this regard, "….the situation has changed now. Students can raise questions which they do not agree with"(p.118). Stephens concludes that this kind of view is "over simplified, and confirming the view of 'culture' as an area of contested discourse rather than a reified construct" (p.119).

Ballard & Clanchy (1991) seem to imply that, since Asian students do not criticize in the classroom publicly in their first culture, they are devoid of the ability to criticize. Leki (1997) suggests that one has only to become closer with these students to find that they "most certainly can and do criticize not only teachers but also institutions and other authorities." (p.239). She refers to both the Chinese revolution (1949) and demonstration at Tiananmen Square (1989) as examples of Chinese students willing and able to criticize in public (and fight for their beliefs). Zamel (1997) also suggested that, such an attitude i.e. non-critical, led Western pedagogues to think the ESL students as less capable of thinking or analyzing critically. This ultimately played a role in limiting "our expectations of students, and reduce instruction to what Fox (1994) herself recognizes is a "caricature" of genuine academic work" (p.343).

The Role of Cultural Differences

While cultural differences are important to understand in dealing with various aspects of human experiences, attributing some Asian language learners' reticence and passivity to solely cultural attributes seems to be groundless and detrimental. Stephens (1997) points out that this simplification may actually be harmful to the understanding of student behavior:

> "in seeking cultural explanations for miscommunication between Chinese students and their tutors in the UK, there is a danger of overlooking what gaps may exist in students' language proficiency and experience, and at the same time resorting to over-generalizations about culture which have a surface appeal, but which are not supported by strong research evidence." (p. 123)

Research has thus attributed cultural differences between the East and the West as an interpretation for the passive learning behavior of the Asian learners. However, counter evidence against passivity is also found which is presented in the following section.

Evidence Against Alleged Passivity

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Language learning is an extremely complex process, which is further complicated by the learners' individual differences and their different social, political and cultural backgrounds. As Tudor (1998) puts it,

> the reality of language teaching [and learning] emerges from a dynamic interaction of [individual and socio-cultural] rationalities, a process which is unique to each classroom and which can rarely be predicted in advance. (p. 319)

It is, thus, reasonable to hypothesize that it is difficult to identify and categorize any learning behavior as shared among a number of groups of individuals especially when they have divergent culture and cover a massive geographical (physical) area. Therefore, the notion of Asian ESL/EFL learners' reticence and passivity may in fact be more of a myth than a universal truth. As Cheng (2000) says in this regard,

> My instinctive distrust of the myth primarily derives from my 10 years' of teaching experiences in China, the numerous class observations that I have made at all levels of English language teaching (ELT) in China, and my discussions with colleagues from around the world. Among the students that I have taught or observed, some are indeed reticent and passive, but many are extremely active and even aggressive. My teaching experiences and my observations have convinced me that Asian students (at least Chinese students) are not culturally predisposed to be reticent and passive in language learning (p.438).

In order to testify whether his teaching experiences and observations are exceptions, Cheng (2000) conducted an informal survey about other teachers' attitudes towards Asian learners' alleged reticence and passivity. He posted the allegations mentioned above on TESL-L[1] and asked for colleagues' reactions. Eighty percent of the responses challenged the stereotypes of Asian students as passive classroom learners. In addition, teachers provided detailed descriptions of the classes they had taught, illustrating that students gave no sign of reticence and passivity at all.

Further, Stephens (1997) mentioned that her own experience in working with mainland Chinese students has disabused her "of more stereotypes than it has supported generalities."(p.121) Stephens is of the opinion that familiarity with any cultural group can reveal individual differences which eventually seem more pronounced than initially perceived or expected similarities. Stephen concluded that if a collectively-oriented culture signifies an overriding tendency to conformity and cooperation with the group, then her experience of working with Chinese students in the UK do not lend it support. . (p.121)

In their two large-scale surveys with university teachers and students in Hong Kong, Littlewood & Liu (1996) found that students gave no evidence of reluctance to adopt

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[1] a world-wide e-mail discussion forum for teachers of English as a second language

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active speech roles in the classroom as students at both secondary and tertiary levels welcomed opportunities (at least in their English classes) to participate actively in class. This is also supported by Littlewood's (1999) discussions conducted in China where students were found generally critical of their teachers for not raising enough points for discussion in class. In a later study, (Littlewood 2000), students' responses to the three questions that dealt with "teacher authority" showed that the students (1) did not see the teacher as a an authority figure who should not be questioned; (2) that they did not want to sit in the class passively receiving knowledge; and (3) they only partly agreed that the teacher should have a greater role in evaluating their learning. (p.33). Littlewood (2000) concluded that this is more likely to be a consequence of the educational contexts that have been provided for them, rather than because of any inherent dispositions of the students themselves.

Further, students' responses to the questionnaire gave clues as to the ways in which students would have liked to be active and independent. They liked activities where they were part of a group in which they were 'all working towards common goals'. When working in these groups they would like to 'help keep the atmosphere friendly and harmonious'. They also liked to 'see a practical purpose' (p.34) in what they were asked to do and to feel their own success will benefit other people. The overall message that emerges from Littlewood's study is that "Asian students do not, in fact, wish to be spoon-fed with facts from an all- knowing fount of knowledge. They want to explore knowledge themselves and find their own answers" (p.34).

Results of Spratt's (1999) study on learners' preferred activities also indicated that students in Hong Kong had a positive attitude towards classroom participation. Among 48 classroom activities, the mean scores for 20 activities were above 4.00 (including 4.00, estimated from graph) on a 1-6 Likert scale. This means students liked these 20 activities, 12 of which were related to class-room participation.

Similar evidence from inside the classroom is becoming more and more common. For example, Ho & Crookall (1995) report on the high degree of autonomy achieved by Hong Kong Chinese students in the context of a simulation, while Marshal & Torpey (1997, cited in Littlewood 2000) reported on their successful experience of involving Japanese students in actively co-constructing a syllabus. Outside the field of language teaching, research (e.g., Whitemill et al,1997, cited in Littlewood 2000) with problem-based learning in Hong Kong revealed how students were readily able to free themselves from the direct authority of their tutors in order to solve problems in groups and organize their own learning .

Contrary to western stereotypes of 'passive', over- dependent student, participants' response in Cortazzi & Jin's (1996) study showed that "a high percentage of Chinese student value independent study" (p.191). In identifying the characteristics of a good student, participants in Coatazzi & Jin's (1996) study made comments such as

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> "…. the good student 'should not be dependent on text book only'. 'He not only listens to the teacher but also thinks about it himself'. 'He masters what the teacher has taught and knows other things by himself'. (p.191)

From the evidence cited earlier, it is reasonable to infer that Asian ESL/EFL students (maybe students throughout the world for that matter) are on a continuum from "very active" to "very passive". Some students are very active, some are very passive, and some are in between. Perhaps the proportion of the "very passive" ones among Asian students is larger than the proportion of their Western counterparts.

In addition, students' opinion emphasized that inner mental activity, questioning, reflection and self- effort of a student are as important as a teacher's instruction: 'he should be good at asking questions which he meets in study life and in life' (p. 191). Some students value the expression of diversity of opinion. Good students 'have the courage to bring up opinions different from those of the teacher. (p. 191). 'A good student must respect the teacher'; but not necessarily with obedience, 'a really good student does not always obey the orders of the teacher. He or she should have their own brains' (p. 191).

From Korea, Park & Oxford (1998) reported on an experimental English Village Course program for college students in Korea. Students attending the program were very active and revealed great willingness to participate in the various activities provided. The success of this program indicated that when a suitable environment is available, most learners can be active and participative.

From Thailand, Thein (1994) reported another success story of an intensive English program conducted at the Asian Institute of Technology in Thailand. The participants in the program, who came from different Asian countries, after a few initial difficulties, began to interact with everyone in the class, participate in discussions, ask questions, respond to others, and put forward their own views. In fact, they exercised considerable initiative in class.

Results of Garrott's (1995) study also exhibit that contemporary Chinese college students tended toward individualism to a much greater degree than analysis carried out at the culture level alone would suggest.

So, while on one hand, teachers complained (and research also claimed) that Asian ESL/EFL students are reticent and passive in class and reluctant to participate in group discussions, on the other hand, reports about students' preferences and behavior indicated that they did (1) like group discussions; (2) they wanted to take active roles in class, and

(3) they wanted to cooperate with the teacher. If we take both the professors and the students' claim for truth, there are two possibilities to account for this contradiction.

Some Possibilities

One possibility is that the professors' and teachers' impression of Asian students' reticence and passivity is expressed by 'some teachers', 'a number of professors' or 'a certain percentage of professors' rather than all teachers or professors.

Another possibility is that Asian students say that they like to take an active role in class but, in reality, some of them are unable to do so due to reasons such as (1) unsuitable methodology; (2) not allowing adequate wait time; (3) lack of language proficiency; (4) incomprehensible input; (5) anxiety. These possibilities co-exist in ESL/EFL reality. More extensive empirical research is needed in order to determine the proportion of "very passive" Asian students and whether this proportion is substantially larger than that of their Western counterparts. And more effective research methods (such as class observations) rather than questionnaires drawing on professors' impressions might help find the truth.

From the discussion above, it can be said that there are instances where Asian students have taken an active role in classroom learning. And it is also evidenced that passivity results from shortcomings both from teachers' and students' sides. The following section explores further these teacher and student- related issues that may account for why some Asian ESL/EFL students are unable to take an active role in the classroom despite their eagerness to do so.

Plausible Reasons for Passivity

In view of the earlier arguments against the cultural interpretations of some Asian students' reticence and passivity, the question arises, "If culture is but one aspect, what other factors must be considered? In my opinion, the factors are much more complex than they are thought to be. Culture is an important element in explaining the alleged behavior, but there are also several teacher and student-related issues which need to be further explored as they are often ignored. All of these factors are of course interconnected and cover both teacher and student-related issues.

The teacher related issues include:

(1) unsuitable methodology;
(2) intolerance of silence and imprecise answers;
(3) failure to relate material to local context;
(4) incomprehensible input; and,
(5) interpersonal skills.

Student related issues include:

(1) lack of language proficiency;
(2) fear and shyness;
(3) anxiety;
(4) adjustment; and
(5) lack of socialization.

Each of these will be discussed further below. As previously mentioned, language learning is an extremely complex process. Any particular observed behavior may be caused by a combination of factors. Kubota (2001) says in this regard "being reticent in mainstream classrooms has more to do with an unwelcoming atmosphere, the mainstream members' lack of willingness to take their share of responsibility to interact with L2 speakers, particular gender dynamics in the classroom, or even mainstream peers' negative attitudes toward ESL students" (p. 31).

Teacher related issues

Teacher related factors may account for the extent to which students engage in interaction. Issues like teachers' approaches and methodologies, their sense of judgment as to where and when to invite students' opinion, their attitude toward teacher-student relationship, may make a difference in the response rate. While selecting the method and approaches if teachers fail to take a whole range of aspects like the learners' age, social contexts, motivation, proficiency level, learning goals etc into account, the class might turn out to be a 'response- poor' one .

Unsuitable methodologies

Different language teaching methodologies entail different learners' behavior in the classroom. A particular methodology may attract or detract learner participation. For example, in a teacher-centered teaching and learning environment, the learners are doomed to reticence and passivity.

Whatever rationale is behind this practice, the result is that such an approach and atmosphere will not encourage students to speak freely, but in fact will prevent any pattern of classroom interaction at all. The teacher plays all the roles in the "pseudo-interaction". And of course the teacher may well say that the students are reluctant to speak so I simply give them the answer.

With a less teacher-centered method, the interaction in the classroom would be different. Cheng's (2000) observations in China based on his supervision of 6-8 pre-service EFL teachers doing teaching practice in secondary schools found that, despite the similarity in

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their background, students' behavior in different classes differed greatly depending on the teacher's method. That is, when teachers adopted a learner-centered method, classes tended to be much more active. Cheng (2000) refers to a similar instance found in a Western teacher's account of a class she taught in Korea:

> "I completed pre-skill activities (e.g., brainstorming and suggesting appropriate vocabulary that might be used, setting schemata), a main activity that accounts the performance level of the students (giving a well-designed intermediate-level activity to intermediate-level students), and then post-activity exercises (e.g. debriefing, summarizing). The students were involved and enthusiastic. It was hard for me to get them to quiet down and pull together as a whole class at the end of the activity". (p. 443)

Before leaving for Korea, this teacher had received well-intentioned advice from her colleagues about ELT in Korea. She prepared herself by reading about Confucianism and Buddhism in order to understand her students' behaviors better. However, as she explains, "passing on the stereotypes was more impeding than helpful" (p. 443). What proved more useful was to concentrate on developing/ searching for more effective teaching methods for her class rather than depending on stereotypical information.

In 1994, Harklau opined that classroom participation depended on how discussion was organized and framed. This organization and framing of discussion resulted in qualitatively superior input and richer, more frequent opportunities for interaction and spoken language output. Further, Harklau (1994) found that in an ESL situation where input from the teacher was more comprehensible, it led to creating extended opportunities for students to interact and participate. Students agreed that they talked the most in ESL classes. As one ESL student commented, "and here [ESL class], I dare to talk more, and gradually I will rather ask more question" (p. 252).

Harklau (1994) also found that the type of question was a factor in increasing ESL students' participation and self expression. For example, it was found that employing an approach which used open-ended questions, modeled extended responses and then asked students to do the same worked very well.[2] Students were not only active participants in these types of ESL class activities, but they even bid for turns.

However, this problem of methodology, as Cheng (2000) points out, is not confined to students who go abroad to study, i.e., ESL situations, but in EFL situations. Students also experienced the same problem when methodological conflicts arose. For example, in China most Western teachers are generally happy with the students' participation in speaking and listening classes, because most students have a strong motivation to experience authentic English with their Western teachers.

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[2] "If you had to think of one picture from the 80s that you would remember, what would it be? Mine would be…." She then called on every student in class to share his/her opinion (Harklau 1994, p.252).

The trouble begins when these Western teachers are assigned to teach reading and writing due to the fact that Western teachers are not familiar with how English reading and writing skills are taught in Chinese classrooms. Western teachers often follow the Western way of teaching which is based on employing considerable discussion as part of the methodology.

This fact leads to a mismatch between the teachers' and students' expectations in that most Chinese students deem reading to be the most important part of their English course. They count on this course "to expand vocabulary, consolidate grammar (at elementary level), increase knowledge, and hopefully develop effective reading strategies and fast reading speed" (p.443). As a result, Western teachers teaching reading and writing lessons are very likely to experience reluctance by the students to participate in classroom discussions.

Unfamiliarity with methods or processes

Asian students are not very familiar with pair-work and group-work, which are integral to the Western style of teaching and are unfamiliar to Asian students. Yet some Western teachers have tended to continue to use their approach without assessing students' preferences or without providing any orientation or guidance as to the formats and functions of these activities.

Cortazzi & Jin (1996) also found a mismatch between teacher and student expectations in classroom activity. While western teachers preferred and expected group work in class, Chinese students believed that the best use of class time for the teacher is to explain things. However, "obliging people to do otherwise could appear to be an infringement of personal liberty and choice, and it is hard to see how this can fit in with any attempt to genuinely humanize the classroom (Hyde (1993, cited in Cheng, 2000)." Imposition of any kind, will in all likelihood, lead to quietude and non-participation due to students' lack of understanding or resistance to the teaching method. Therefore, teachers who plan to use methodologies involving students' participation must make sure that the students are familiar with and accept such methodologies. Otherwise, this may require orientation in advance.

Intolerance of silence and imprecise answers

Teachers' intolerance of silence may in fact result in more silence. Not all students are equally prompt in organizing their thoughts. Yet some teachers might expect an immediate response from the students.

Many teachers in Tsui's (1996) study report that they themselves disliked or were afraid of silence, and that they felt very uneasy or impatient when they failed to get an

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immediate response from students. Therefore, when any student failed to respond promptly, they allocated the turn to other students without allowing the first student enough wait time.

Sometimes the teacher kept repeating the same question or the name of the student. To the teacher it was a way to fill the silence, and in effect, the teacher not only put a great deal of pressure on the students and frightened them, but also may have undermined the self-esteem. Rowe's (1969, cited in Tsui, 1996) study revealed that the average wait time was only one second.

Another study by White & Lightbown (1984, cited in Tsui, 1996) revealed the average wait time to be 2.1 seconds. For ESL students who are still learning the target language, it is often impossible to produce an immediate verbal response to the teacher's question. New students may take some time first to process the question and then to formulate the answer before it is voiced to the class. A short wait time is intimidating. It is possible for the teachers, (as is evidenced by Tsui 1996), to have the misconception that an effective teacher should solicit immediate responses from students and that there should be "talk" all the time. The consequence of such a belief was expressed by one teacher in the study, "When there is more teacher talk, there will be less student participation, resulting in long silences in the classroom that will prompt the teacher to talk even more" (p. 153).

Linked to this intolerance of silence is the uneven allocation of turns. In order to ensure and elicit responses, teachers tend to ask the brighter students. In such instances, the weaker and shyer students feel ignored and thus do not wish to give responses. In fact, the more they feel neglected the less willing they will be to contribute.

Another facet of teachers' intolerance is their obsession with 'correct' or 'right' answer. If teachers are obsessed with the 'correct' or 'right' answer and keeps constantly correcting the students' delivery, as is frequently the case in EFL contexts, they will prefer not to speak up. Tsui (1996) says in this regard, "given the importance that many ESL teachers attach to correctness, the constant error correction students receive from the teacher can be seen by them as a form of mild public humiliation" (p. 156).

Failure to relate material to local context

In an EFL situation, it is often a common practice for Western teachers to draw on or to use examples from their home cultures to explain issues or problems. However, this inability /reluctance to relate material to the local context on the part of the Western teachers is one major factor contributing to passivity of Non Native English Speaking (NNES).

Flowerdew & Miller (1995) reported that some of the examples the lecturers used were unfamiliar to the students and oriented too much to the U.K. resulting in confusion on the part of the students.

In circumstances like this, students will definitely be unable to contribute to the classroom. A student from a class on housing given by a British lecturer resounded this very complaint, "Usually he [the lecturer] takes example from U.K. and sometimes I don't understand because I am not familiar with U.K. housing. Because he is British he is familiar with the U.K. situation but not Hong Kong". (p. 360)

Further, Flowerdew & Miller (1995) have drawn attention to another facet of this problem which involves Western teachers (in EFL situations) referring to international celebrities, products and organizations which might be well known locally but by either different names, or adapted to Cantonese phonology. [3]

Incomprehensible input

One explanation for a lack of response is that students do not understand the teachers' instructions and questions or the teachers themselves ask unclear or ambiguous questions. This was found in Tsui (1996) where one teacher reported that: "I realized that what I thought were simple and clear questions were in fact quite difficult to understand. Not only this but the questions were often confusing and not specific enough" (p. 154). In such instances, Asian students do not usually ask the teacher for clarification, this is particularly true when they have to ask questions in English.

In classes with foreign teachers the accents might be incomprehensible for the Asian students. Asian students must undergo language competency tests to study abroad. Generally students listen to recorded cassettes and audio visual materials but when exposed to the actual non-recorded voices of their foreign teachers, the variation in English accents may prove difficult to comprehend.

Students may have trouble particularly during the long sentences. Studies (e.g., Horowitz et al. 1986; Liu 1989; cited in Tsui, 1996) showed that students were frightened when they did not understand what the teacher was saying in the foreign language. 20 percent of the students in the survey of Horowitz et al (1986) agreed with the statement, "I get nervous when I do not understand every word the language teacher says" (p.159).

Liu (1986), also found that students strongly agreed with the statement, "I always try to catch every word when listening to English, if I fail to do so, I will feel anxious and this

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[3] As an example, Flowerdew & Miller (1995) mentioned a lecturer who based a complete lecture around the computer product Atari from the assumption that it would be familiar to his students. However, it later turned out that Atari has a completely different name in Cantonese, so students did not pick up on the significance of this important example.

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affects my comprehension what follows" (p.159). They also agreed with the statement, "Before and when listening to English I am worried that I fail to understand." (p.159)

Thus, if students are unable to fully understand or to relate to what the teacher is saying, there will be little classroom interaction on the part of the students.

Interpersonal skills

Teachers' personality and interpersonal skills may be a factor behind students' participation and response. EFL students may distance themselves from their foreign teachers as they have almost nothing in common. A foreign teacher, in essence, appears as a stranger in the classroom. Because the teacher is the 'odd one out', it is the teacher's responsibility to build a rapport with his/her students. Teachers should take the initiative to befriend the students within the shortest possible time. One of the foreign teachers in Flowerdew & Miller (1995) study said, "I want a more interactive and participatory style…I want the students to question me about my experiences". (p.359)

Students will ask questions about a teacher's experience if and when they feel close to and easy enough with the teacher. Due to lack of interpersonal skills/ aloof or reserved personality of the teacher, students may not feel free to interact with the teacher. The more friendly and accessible the teacher is, the higher are the possibilities of interaction. Personal experience of a colleague of ours shows the value of this friendliness and accessibility.[4]

This is further evidenced by Stephens (1997) who stressed a frank and friendly personal relationship with the students which helped students open up. When teachers are able to establish such a relationship as Stephens (1997) herself did, students may be less afraid or worried in voicing their opinions. Due to her personal relationship with the students Stephens found that "friendly disagreement" (p.119) was a constant feature of their discussions.

Responding to disagreement is equally crucial for creating participation –friendly atmosphere in the classroom. Some teachers express their annoyance if the students' response does not match their expectation. They do it by stopping the learner half way through the response, by facial expression (e.g., wrinkling the forehead), by declaring the response as imprecise and so forth. This kind of attitude on the part of the teacher may deter students from venturing a response. In instances of disagreement or imprecision, if the teacher appreciates the student by saying things like - what you say is quite interesting …what else can be said?... or- yea…. that is another way of looking at this issue and so on.

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[4] One of my classmates has taught in China for two years. She reports her students to be so free and friendly with her that they come to her place at their will, chat for hours, sometimes go out for dinner, sight seeing, shopping, etc.

Thus, lack of rapport between the student and teacher may partially account for the passivity of the students. Another facet of the socialization is associated with the concept of being 'sociable' which means the teacher will realize/ have an understanding of the students' problem and will offer help spontaneously without waiting to be asked. For example, Chinese students with problems in the class expect the teacher to realize this and offer help, whereas the western teacher will usually assume that any students with problem will ask for help; yet a Chinese student rarely asks questions like this in class (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996).

Student related issues

Being active in the classroom involves some skills on the part of the students. While lack of language proficiency surfaces as the most common factor behind the perceived classroom behavior of Asian students, a few other factors such as fear and shyness, anxiety, adjustment, lack of socialization may be equally important. Following is a discussion of these student related issues.

Language Proficiency

Students' lack of required language proficiency can probably be the biggest factor behind reticence in ESL/EFL classes. Tsui (1996) reported that most teachers (in her study) attributed student reticence to low English proficiency. The students in this study initiated a response, but then decided not to take the risk and resorted to a declaration of ignorance. It is likely that students are either not sure of the answer and had difficulties in expressing themselves.

One of the teachers interviewed in that study opined that the students' failure to respond to teachers' questions was a result less from lack of knowledge but more of the insufficient English proficiency.

This is a rather natural expected result when students pay too much attention to the development of receptive skills and too little attention to that of productive skills, such as oral communicative ability. Asian students have very little opportunity to speak in English in their early schooling. Littlewood & Liu, (1996) found that listening to the teacher in an EFL situation was the foremost activity, followed by writing essays and reading comprehension exercises.

In an EFL environment where input is poor, opportunities to communicate/use the language is restricted basically to the classroom, proficiency and confidence suffer. When Asian students come from an ESL to an EFL environment (to study in the Universities) with such poor oral communicative ability, they are more likely to be quiet.

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Jones (1999), investigating this EFL to ESL situation, pointed out "beyond doubt, language difficulty is a significant factor in inhibiting effective communication between NNS students and their NS teachers and counterpart" (p. 257). He further commented that although these students had been officially judged competent to undertake studies through the medium of English, many of them still struggle with the language and some certainly are restrained in participation by the fear of making face-threatening linguistic errors in the presence of their native peers.

Most Asian EFL students who seek study opportunities in Western universities have to take TOEFL, GRE, IELTS or other equivalent language tests. However, a high score on any of these tests does not necessarily mean the test takers' overall English proficiency required to undertake academic studies in the West. Scores on these high stake tests do not reflect, nor are they designed to indicate communicative competence.[5] No doubt, these students can obtain high scores, but their language proficiency, especially their oral communicative skills, is far from what is required for their intended academic studies in the West.

Mason (1995, cited in Ferris & Tagg, 1996) claims that students with TOEFL scores high enough for admission to most US university programs (550-600) may not be linguistically proficient enough for the academic listening tasks confronting them. Naturally we can make an inference that if Asian students have fewer problems with language, both in understanding and production; they would be more inclined to take active roles in class.

Stephens' (1997) study supported this influence by reporting that Chinese students participate freely and independently in discussion where they understand the language that is being used, and where the ground rules for the expression of ideas are made clear. Providing necessary support and allowing learners the opportunity to plan before they produce may also encourage greater learner participation in the language classroom.

Fear and shyness

The lack of proficiency is further complicated when the fear of making mistakes is added to the equation. This fear of making mistakes deters students from speaking out in front of their peers and teachers. Cortazzi & Jin (1996) illustrated that students were 'afraid of being ashamed', 'afraid of asking foolish questions', 'feared others' murmurs', 'those who didn't ask questions actually had a lot to say but were too shy to speak in class', 'students in China are not as extrovert as those in the west. They often preferred to be asked to answer a question rather than initiate one'. (p.196)

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[5] In China, TOEFL takers spend hundreds of hours doing simulated tests to develop test-taking strategies rather than improving their real language skills. The practice cassettes for listening comprehension are invariably taped with standard American English. The speech and accent are manipulated closest to the real tests. (Cheng, 2000)

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Research by Tsui, (1996) corroborated this aspect of fear and shyness. Students' fear of making mistakes and being negatively evaluated both by teachers and their peers might result in passivity. As one teacher in the study pointed out- "They are unwilling to speak in English for fear that they may make silly mistakes in front of the brighter students" (p.150). In some instances students preferred to remain silent to avoid being laughed at as the question was deemed too simple or too complicated for them to answer. Students' passivity at times may be interpreted as a lack of preparedness for the lesson, but in fact, it is shyness that makes them remain quiet. The following quote from one teacher indicates this,

> … I wondered whether they prepared their lesson or not. Actually most of them did but they were too shy to give an answer even though they knew the answers. Also they were afraid of losing face in front of their classmates if they gave me a wrong answer (p.150)

Liu's (1989) study revealed that the students found it embarrassing to raise their hands to answer questions in class. They were very nervous when their teacher asked them a question which they have not prepared for. They were afraid of making mistakes and they felt very uneasy when they couldn't express themselves.

According to Tsui (1996) students' fear of making mistakes and being negatively evaluated can be teacher- induced. The following excerpt indicated how teachers with unrealistic expectations tended to add to the fear of the students: "though my attitude might be gentle and encouraging, I was expecting some correct answer most of the time. Given the [sensitive] nature of the class, they would feel the strain and were less willing to contribute unless they felt they have got the 'right answer'" (p.151).

Anxiety

In addition to fear of making mistakes or of appearing stupid, anxiety may another big factor behind the reticence. The anxieties students may experience in language learning and speaking may include anxiety for high performance, test anxiety, and anxiety for shining out in front of peers. Language learning is not merely a process of acquiring linguistic rules or participating in communication activities but also a constant process of undermining our self-concept. As Tsui (1996) said in this regard:

> we need to understand language learning not only as a process of acquiring linguistic rules or participating in communication activities, but as a process in which individual learners are constantly putting themselves in a vulnerable position of having their own self-concept undermined and subjecting themselves to negative evaluations . This process is stressful and likely to generate much anxiety in the learners (p. 155).

A component of foreign language anxiety is language shock which refers to negative self-perception (Schumann & Schumann, 1978, cited in Hilleson, 1996). With this form of anxiety students feel they can not function properly within the community since they have been deprived of their real personality and are embarrassed to display a self that is fundamentally incompetent.

Guiora (1983; cited in Tsui, 1996) also described second language learning as "a profoundly unsettling psychological proposition" When communicating in a second language, learners may continually feel insecure about fully representing their personality and their intelligence. As Horowitz et al (1986; cited in Tsui, 1996) pointed out, "any performance in the L2 is likely to challenge an individual's self concept as a competent communicator and lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear or even panic" (p.156). Studies on language learning anxieties in ESL/EFL classrooms showed that in general students were afraid to speak in a foreign language. Nearly half of the participants in a study undertaken by Horowitz *et al* (1986, cited in Tsui, 1996) reported that they started to panic when they had to speak without preparation in language classes and that they were nervous and confused when speaking in their language classes.

Another facet of this anxiety was found with students with high English competency in the study of Allwright & Bailey (1991). They pointed out that some very competent learners were anxious because if they did not make mistakes, they would stand out from their peers and be resented. To avoid this, they deliberately made mistakes. Even when this may have resulted in being criticized by the teacher, one result of this dilemma was that some students withdrew from interaction in general. Tsui, (1996) indicated that the anxiety generated by trying not to show that one was better than the rest was perhaps even more serious among Chinese students , whose culture emphasizes modesty.

Test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation also deterred students from participation. Test anxiety arose from the fear of failure which is closely related to fear of negative evaluation. In many ESL/EFL classrooms students are constantly required to perform orally in front of the whole class, which is often one form of testing. Their performance is thus continuously evaluated by both their teachers and their peers. It is therefore understandable that different students will try to avoid this type of subjecting themselves to evaluation by the teachers and their peers.

Finally, related to the performance and 'face' is the need to speak without any errors. Strong desire to speak English well substantially adds to the anxiety. A study by Yu et al (1996, cited in Littlewood & Liu, 1996) indicated that when students spoke English they had a strong need to speak it well and many students were overcome by a sense of unease because they did not think they were performing well enough. Related to this is the anxiety about standing out in a group or the likelihood of making a fool of themselves, especially when they are not confident about their English. The concept of "uncertainty

avoidance" might work here. Speaking up in class especially raising questions or comments is a risky business in many students' eyes.

Adjustment

When students migrate from an EFL environment to an ESL environment, it may take some time to settle in the new teaching learning culture. Asian students consist fairly a large chunk of the student population in Western universities.

According to Ballard (1996), so long as these students are in their home educational systems, differences in intellectual approach between school and university, between one degree and another, between one discipline and another are relatively easy to accommodate. When they come to the western universities, they are not merely coming from other language backgrounds but more importantly from other cultural background. Now they have to adjust to a new intellectual culture, a new way of thinking and processing knowledge to meet the expectations of the Western academia.

The teaching- learning approaches may be new and even strange to Asian students. They may not see any point in taking part in discussions at all. Even if they do see the point, and have a strong desire to participate, they may not be ready yet, partly because they are not used to the new teaching style and partly because they are unsure about the Western style discourse conventions such as the rules of turn-taking and the use of non-verbal language (Cheng, 2000). Thus, students may take some time to adjust to this new teaching learning culture of Western academia.

Littlewood's (2000) discussions with Hong Kong Chinese students who took courses for international students in the UK and USA revealed their initial difficulties in adapting to the 'new' class discussion style in their programs. In part, these difficulties were linguistic, but they were also due to different conventions and expectations. One student, for example, talked about her initial annoyance with other students who persistently interrupted the teacher. Another student in Ballard (1996) explained: "I do not wish to be like Australian students who criticize each other and even contradict their lecturer" (p.158). These instances indicate that Asian students have trouble understanding the norms and forms of Western classroom interactions and therefore the issue of adjustment might have a role behind their passivity.

Lack of socialization

Mixing with their Western peers in foreign university settings may be a good avenue for ESL students to be familiar with the Western culture and social norms. It might help them overcome the shyness and nervousness they might experience in expressing themselves in the second language as well as minimizing the difficulty in understanding

conversations   which may cause anxiety at an interactional level when attempting to develop relationships with other students.

However, ESL students often do not interact much with their Western peers outside the classroom. Once they are out of the classroom, they hang around with their compatriots, virtually living in an EFL situation. As a result, they are intimidated by the sociolinguistic environment of classes.

Lack of linguistic competence coupled with a lack of background knowledge of the target culture leads to frustration and embarrassment for the Asian students. This is evident from the sentiment of a participant in Harkalaus (1994) study,

> "… It is very hard for a newcomer, especially, you know, you do not know English, not very well. And then you don't know about, the society very much, you know, they talk about singer or movie star. You could not know anything right?" (p. 263)

From the above discussion it is found that a host of interrelated issues both from the teachers' and students' side play a role in the reticence and passivity of Asian students. From the teachers' reports (e.g., Tsui, 1996) on their attempts to overcome the perceived problem of reticence, we can see that teachers' strategies minimize or exacerbate student participation in classroom learning.

Teacher's personality may also be a factor in building a quick rapport with the students which may bridge the gap between the student and the teacher.

There are student related issues such as lack of adequate language competence, fear and shyness, anxiety, and lack of socialization. Lack of socialization, particularly in EFL environment, may lead to the lack of exposure to the second language and culture. There are student related issues that have overlapping with teacher related issues. For example, students' fear and anxiety can be teacher –induced. In the following section I will briefly discuss the implications of stereotyping on teaching- learning.

Pedagogical Implications of Stereotyping

Stereotyping students   has adverse effects on both teaching and learning. It might lead to an underestimation of the potential of ESL/EFL students which in turn might dent the self confidence of the learners. Basically, misunderstanding potential by teacher leads to reduction of self-confidence of student. Through this stereotyping, Asian students' abilities and ways of learning are being interpreted according to current Western notions of English language teaching. Such views promote a monolithic, static, and exoticized image of culture as well as promote deterministic thinking that regards students as rigidly bound by cultural traditions (Kubota, 1999 p.14).

Cortazzi & Jin (1996) argue that this is a kind of linguistic or cultural imperialism in which one culture of learning is imposed on those who naturally follow another, and that the latter way is made to appear inadequate or second class. Stereotypes might hinder the quest for clarity as Garrott (1995) has pointed out that stereotypes cloud rather than clarify, and labels are odious.

Wolfe et al (1996) has also elaborated on the negative effects of stereotyping in the classroom. According to them, stereotypes can significantly bias our judgments about other people. Rosenthal & Jacobson's (1968, cited in Wolfe et al, 1996) work on teacher expectancies suggests that a priori expectations about a student's academic ability can easily lead a teacher to treat the students differently and in accordance with those expectancies, cause students to conform to these expectancies, regardless of their natural ability. Cautioning that stereotypes have a "more subtle and, perhaps, more pernicious influence on the stereotyped targets" Wolfe et al. goes on to comment that:

> Given the subtle bias potentially present in the treatment of members of stereotyped groups, outcomes or evaluations may be accurate and deserved, but often they are biased and unfair. This leaves members of stereotyped groups in a quandary: Are these evaluations fair or are they the result of prejudice? (p. 179).

Another unfortunate consequence of stereotyping according to Major & Crooker (1993, cited in Wolfe et al, 1996) is that any positive outcomes may also be questioned. That is, members of stereotyped groups might discount positive evaluations and successful experiences as attempts to avoid appearing prejudiced or as the result of feelings of pity. Not taking credit for success may lead to a decline in motivation and achievement. Even if no one overtly expresses this belief, the culturally shared stereotype that Asian students are neither as active nor intelligent as their Western peers, might undermine academic performance.

Stereotyping might have the worst effect on students through what has been called self fulfilling prophecy in educational psychology. It is a concept to explain how a belief or expectation, whether correct or not, affects the outcome of a situation or the way a person (or group) will behave. Thus, for example, if we keep telling a teenager that he is worthless, has no sense of right or wrong, and is not going to amount anything, he will probably respond accordingly.

In the same way, if teachers form certain expectations of a group of students and communicate those expectations with various cues, the group will tend to respond to these cues by adjusting their behavior to match them. The result is that the original expectation becomes true. This creates a circle of self-fulfilling prophecies. Good & Brophy, (1986) suggested that once a teacher develops an expectation about a student,

such as a particular student is not capable of learning; the teacher interprets subsequent ambiguous behavior or events in a way consistent with the original expectation.

Thus, stereotyping may potentially impede the learning of Asian students by deteriorating their self-confidence through biased judgments of their Western teachers. Stereotyping may lead to an underestimation of the potential of Asian students. It may also subject the students to a different treatment which in turn may result in a decline of motivation.

Conclusions

Culture certainly plays an important role in the social and academic development of students, but it should not be regarded as the sole factor behind the reticence and passivity of the Asian students. In this paper, we have reviewed the cultural factors attributed to the alleged reticence and passivity of Asian students and argued them to be over-generalizations.

A careful look at the studies from which these generalizations emanate reveals that the allegations are largely based on the impressions of a small number of teachers or professors in small scale surveys. Therefore, counter evidence is not difficult to find as we have done in this paper.

However, it may be easier to establish whether or not Asian students are reticent and passive learners than to explain why *some* Asian learners have indeed been observed to be quieter than desired.

In this article we have argued that both teacher and student related factors other than cultural attributes may also have their role behind the perceived reticence and passivity of the Asian students. Other factors and solutions to the problem in question are candidate for further exploration.

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