

# A Case Study of an In-class Silent Postgraduate Chinese Student in London Metropolitan University: a Journey of Learning

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## Introduction

As headmaster of Tuha Petroleum Foreign Language School, Xinjiang, PR, China, I used to be engaged in the forms of inquiry that were to a large degree located within schools and classrooms. Most unforgettably, I constantly heard the complaints from the foreign teachers teaching Oral English in my school, regarding “the silent Chinese learners”. This did not catch my attention until I was asked to reflect on what I had not noticed before by Fiona English, a lecturer of Intercultural Perspectives on Academic Writing and Research, as one of the research themes. In the process of conscious reflection I have come to realize that I was an in-class silent postgraduate student.

I was silent in the classroom, seldom asking questions or joining class discussion voluntarily. Unless called upon personally to respond to a question or required to do a presentation, I have done minimal class participation. However, such silence in class was far from what I had desired. In fact, I was often upset and frustrated by the fact that a range of negative feelings such as anxiety, depression, inferiority and loss of confidence associated with my low level of participation. I felt bad because I had the feeling that I was being left out of the class, and was not able to endure it, exposed completely to an English-speaking environment with one hundred percent of the students from outside the UK.

Given the differences in historical, geographical, linguistic, and cultural background of Chinese students and the international peers in the classroom teaching and learning settings in London Metropolitan University, the marked difference in these students’ in-class behaviours has engaged my attention and that of another Chinese student, who shared her views on the University’s WebCT at the beginning of the term. In the current learning environment, Chinese students have been largely depicted as passive recipients and quiet learners, appearing reluctant to adopt active roles in classroom discussions. Jan Bamford, Tim Marr, Gary Pheiffer and Inge Weber-Newth (2002) cited Woodrow & Sham (2001) stating, “Chinese students have displayed a preference for working alone rather than in groups; they tend not to like asking questions, and to set little value by peer-group discussion.” This silent in-class behaviour is also interpreted as a barrier to the fostering of good learning practice, as participation is viewed as an activity that develops independent learning skills and the ability to apply knowledge (Sivan, Leung, Woon, &

Kember, 2000).

In the paper, through the narrative analysis of my personal experiences I have developed my view into: 1) ‘waking up’ those passive learners mainly from mainland China; and 2) equipping teaching staff with better information, and better skills to deal with, to match their teaching with those silent learners effectively.

In the paper, the word ‘I’ is used to mean a Chinese postgraduate student, studying International ELT & Sociolinguistics in London Metropolitan University, whose cultural background has firmly rooted in Confucianism. Believable the quoted examples of ‘mine’ are the ones existing largely in the Chinese students studying in the UK.

In the paper, the word “silent” is not merely defined as an individual decision not to speak. It is explained as classroom processes in which “my” own characteristics interacts with classroom contexts to bring about their reluctance to participate, despite opportunity to do so.

### **A Brief Review to the In-class Silence of Chinese Students**

From the required readings of *Intercultural Perspectives on Academic Writing and Research on the WebCT* and from some of the books on the reading-list, I have known that the silent in-class behaviour of Chinese students is by no means new or limited to the UK classes.

Jackson (2002) found that Chinese students were commonly concerned about their ability to express their thought in English. Their low proficiency in English had been associated with reduced confidence in the ability to participate orally in classroom discussion. Liu and Littlewood (1997) found most Chinese students were accustomed to minimal speaking opportunities at school, where ‘listen to teacher’ had been their most frequent classroom experience. As well, these students’ perceptions about acceptable behaviours in the classroom were influenced by the cultural meanings of appropriate participation.

Confusion heritage culture has been frequently cited by many researchers for explaining Chinese students’ apparent passivity and reticence in the classroom (Spizzica, 1997). Influenced by the Confucian values, for instance, Chinese students were characterized as generally quiet in class and less likely to question or challenge their teachers. Educated by the Confucian pedagogies, Chinese students preferred didactic and teacher-centred style of teaching and would show great respect for the wisdom and knowledge of their teachers (Kirkbride & Tang 1999). Carson & Nelson (1996) found that Chinese international students engaged in extensive self-monitoring to avoid criticizing or disagreeing with the work and perspectives of their peers. Consistent with Confucian ‘maxims of modesty’, for instance, Chinese students prefer less frequent participation and brief responses in class so as to avoid dominating the discussion and to avoid being labelled as a ‘show-off’ by their Chinese peers (Liu & Littlewood, 1997). Remaining silent is one strategy used by Chinese students to avoid the awkwardness associated with disagreement and, thus, maintain harmonious relationships with others (Ho & Crookall, 1995; Jackson, 2002).

However, only placing emphasis on the English language barrier and cultural differences, without considering aspects of the UK educational contexts or the UK educational culture may simplify the underlying silence of the

students in their classrooms. Seen the increasing number of international students from Mainland China to the universities in the UK, it is important to understand how their differences in socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds interact with aspects of the UK educational contexts or culture to shape their learning experiences.

*Watch me: Self-reported and Analysed Silence in the Classroom*  
*Case one: language hurdles and their influence*

My level of English proficiency was identified as a primary barrier to my classroom participation. For instance, in 1999, sponsored by the British Council and the IATEFL Headquarters, I was invited to attend the 33<sup>rd</sup> IATEFL Annual Conference held in the Heriot-watt University in Edinburgh. During the 4-day conference, I had great difficulty in understanding most of the presentations, and could not fully be involved in the plenary discussion and the SIG (the special interest group) discussion and it was very hard for me to take notes, respond to questions and so forth.

Specifically, feeling nervous for lack of language competence was my frequent experience. For instance, I sweated a lot when I was doing my presentation on *Linguistic Human Rights and English Teachers* written by Skutnabb-Kangas in the year of 2000 for the core course: Sociolinguistics, even if I thoroughly read the article and fully understood the article and did lots of research on the related readings in the British Library. But still my heart was beating rapidly in the presentation stage. I felt pressured by the possibility that my English might not be understood by others and felt awkward in understanding the English spoken by the group mates in the discussion of the questions raised at the end of my presentation.

Usually I hesitated to join class discussions, worrying that I would be unable to deal with the possible conflicts or misunderstandings occurring during conversations. The challenges of English communication confronting me were also accompanied by a sense of incompetence. I was concerned about how my lecturers would react to my English proficiency, and this appeared to influence my decision-making about classroom participation.

Brick and Louie (1994) viewed that Chinese students typically regarded correctness as a highly desirable quality. Hence, they feared appearing foolish by making mistakes as simple as grammar or pronunciation imperfections if they actively participated in class, as these could have significant consequences for them, such as being laughed at by friends and classmates. The difficulty in expressing oneself in another language seems common among Chinese students abroad, and is brought forward as a more likely cause of lack of participation relative to other 'external' factors. Lack of language competence may also negatively influence self-esteem, and hence limit in-class participation (Watkins, 1996). Impeded participation due to language difficulties also emerges from interviews with Chinese and other international students themselves in research directed towards relieving their problems while at university (Lee, 1997).

The above insights from the related literature briefly summarised give me a better understanding of the complexity surrounding a relatively simple behaviour self-observed in class (**silence!**).

*Case two: lack of basic understanding of the UK educational context as well as*

*the UK educational culture and knowledge base*

I had never been asked to do any presentation in my home country from my primary school till the completion of the BA study. Instead I have attended countless examinations or tests, which have been adopted as the unique super-powerful tool of evaluation and assessment in China for hundreds of years. I had difficulty in giving my first presentation (mentioned above), largely because I was not familiar with the presentational format and approach as well as the language barrier, and thus I did not know ‘how to do it’ or ‘what is the appropriate way to do it’. Similarly, I found it difficult to discuss questions with my peer students, because I was not sure to what extent I should discuss the issue raised in the article, whether they would like to be questioned in that way, or whether they had time to discuss questions with me. The confusion caused by the lack of the background knowledge basis impeded my understanding of the criteria of a good presentation and limited my ability to respond to it properly.

Since I was a school pupil, I have been taught to take the classroom teachings very seriously and behaved formally and well. It was easy to see that the peers in my class seemed to participate causally in class. They looked relaxed, they cut in the discussions any time, and they said whatever they wanted to say and so on. In contrast, I tended to consider carefully my ideas or questions and the reactions each time before I raised my hand and got the lecturer’s permission and spoke out. Lots of times, I thought that if I asked questions in the process of the lecturer’s professing, I would bother others, and my questions could slow down the class schedule, or might not interest other students. In most of the schools in China, “four ups” (hand up, stand up, speak up, and shut up) has always been encouraged to be remembered by students. Simultaneously, when you answer questions in class, teachers would comment on your answers, like it is good or bad.... So, as students, you would evaluate your answers before you speak out. If you didn’t answer correctly, you wouldn’t be that confident later. However after my 2-month close observation of my peers and that of lecturers’ response in the classroom, this turned out not to be a problem.

Sometimes I was afraid of losing face in front of others because of my confusions. ‘Face or *mianzi*’ (**Mianzi Culture**) the regard in which one is held by others or the light in which one appears, is vitally important to the Chinese student. Causing someone to lose face, publicly or in front of their classmates through criticizing, failing to treat with respect, a fit of anger, or other insulting behaviour results in a loss of cooperation and even, in extreme occasions, with subtle retaliation against the professor months after the original action transpired (Liu & Littlewood, 1997).

Chinese students are seen by many commentators to be governed by the fundamental rules of “respect for superiors” and “loyalty and filial piety”, with Confucianism as the central element of Chinese identity. In Chinese culture the ideal educator is a benevolent autocrat, much like the father of a small child who may be kind but in the end “always knows best.” Students expect to be told what to do, and it is not uncommon to have Chinese teachers lecture one hundred percent out of the book. This educational structure is reinforced by a deeply embedded cultural and historical emphasis on examinations as a prerequisite for promotion. The traditional response of Chinese students is to

concentrate only on memorizing the material -- without questions, speaking up, or discussion (Chan, 1999).

Influenced forcibly by the traditional Chinese culture, and the total lack of basic appreciation of the UK educational contexts as well as the UK educational culture and knowledge base, I seemed to be a clumsy oaf in the class. Moreover, my personal unfamiliarity with peer students in class was often identified as an important element that could inhibit me to be involved in the classroom participation. Sitting in a large class in which we did not know one another was thought of as cause of pressure, because I worried about how I would be perceived by my classmates, influencing my lack of classroom participation. I did believe that interacting with peer students outside the classrooms would enhance knowledge of one other's and increase comfort in communication, indirectly improving my performance in the classroom. Lots of times, I have failed to have a natural communication with them in the break time.

### *Case three: indigenous knowledge sharing in the classroom*

Several times, I confronted 'no response' situations in class, feeling uncomfortable sharing my ideas related to China in class. Before my peers could really understand what I was saying, they just changed the topic. If this happened just once or twice, I would not give up. Since I figured out how many times and why my peers and sometimes lecturers had little interest in what I shared in class, I began to think and rethink of the value of Chinese knowledge and the relationship between different forms of knowledge in the UK educational contexts. Very often, I thought I was not understandable, since I felt that they were far more interested in Chinese life habits such as Chinese food than in my working experiences in China. It seemed that from the second week of this semester, I had nothing to talk about. Subconsciously I persisted in that because the backgrounds of the students were different, they could not follow my ideas, and follow my perspectives. If I were asked to talk about the indigenous knowledge, I could only talk about something very superficial.

Lack of recognition and familiarity from the lecturers or peer students for the distinctive knowledge and perspective made meaningful sharing and discussion of Chinese knowledge difficult (Deng & Liu 1999). Sometimes, I felt like cross talking. I knew what I was talking about, but they were talking about other things. The unfamiliarity of peer students or lecturers with Chinese society, knowledge and culture also limited their ability to respond to and engage in discussion and thus discouraged my attempt to exchange cross-cultural information of knowledge.

The existing stereotypes and misconception about China and Chinese society sometimes impeded the ability of the peer students and of lecturers respond to me in culturally sensitive ways. I was annoyed by fixed and homogenous of China and Chinese society from them. If I said something different from their expectations, it was kind of like very unhappy. My repeated experiences of failure in sharing indigenous knowledge contributed to my silence in the classroom.

Illustrating these experiences of my two-month journey of learning in the UK, I have come to recognize the differences among the international students in my class. Within the classroom settings, to some degree, the perceived

devaluation of Chinese knowledge from peer students resulted in or reinforced my continued silence in the classroom.

Despite various constraints, my critical thinking about the indigenous knowledge sharing experiences can also be understood as a resistance to the hegemonic knowledge systems and pedagogies in the classroom. The collaboration among the peer students are required within or without the classroom settings, not unilateral and unidirectional but multilateral and bidirectional process.

As a Chinese postgraduate student, I can self-identify the silent self, and I hope to provide such information that will enrich the notion of 'diversity' and move towards the co-construction of a more inclusive learning environment.

Sometimes I thought if I had just graduated from university and immediately come here, that would have been much easier.... But everything here has been like a new world. As an adult student with very-long-time working experience and a more fixed way of thinking, to survive in the new educational environment, therefore, I had to acquiesce to presenting mainstream in order to fulfill academic requirements. I was always joking with myself, saying I was being brainwashed now and then.

### *Challenges: Re-recognition of the Traditional Chinese Learning Way*

Historically the traditional Chinese learning way can be traced to the Confucian concept of education - a process based on rote learning; memorizing endless books and taking examinations over the contents. This has created more passive Chinese students with an incredible mastery of the memorization process but without the richness of application, internalization, or in-class dialogue.

From a cultural point of view there are two major reasons that Chinese students do not engage in interactive learning. The primary reason is due to their high authority, hierarchical society in which lower status students are the passive recipients of one-way communication from higher status lecturers or professors. A closely related secondary reason is that in the Chinese culture, questions or challenges from students may possibly cause a loss of face, for instance, if the professor does not know the answer or else can appear too direct and confrontational, risking the harmony of the group (Deng & Liu, 1999).

"When in Rome, do as Romans do." This is a famous English proverb telling us the intercultural awareness is especially important. Lack of cultural knowledge affects one's comprehension negatively. In the accordance with the saying, instead of being told what to think, as a postgraduate student in the UK, I am ready to come up with my own solutions to large verities of problems unthought-of. The most important thing worth mentioning is that I have had the willingness to switch off the passive learning behaviour and to match my learning with that required in the UK educational contexts!

China is in a period of transition, with the previous system of management education gradually being replaced by a new one. The old system is dissolving, but has not disappeared. Replacing the traditional paradigm will be a lengthy and patient undertaking and painstaking. However, as headmaster of a leading school in Xinjiang, PR, China, I myself must be with the transition. As a result, when I complete my MA and return to my school, I will manage to change the teachers' classroom behaviour and reform the students' learning ways, developing their competence of critical thinking. "Five Changes" is to be

carried out:

1. Change the top-down communication into the side-by-side communication;
2. Change the covert student feedback into the overt student feedback;
3. Change the ascribed teacher status into the achieved teacher status;
4. Change the autocratic teaching style into the democratic teaching style;
5. Change the relationship oriented into the task oriented.

### *Hopeful Expectation*

The main lesson from the two-month experiences studying in the London Metropolitan University is that my in-class silence does not signal a fault of a teacher, but a difference that may be dealt with ad hoc techniques. Deng & Liu (1999) stated, "Facing heterogeneous international students requires the lecturers to be more alert than in the case of a class that is uniform, culturally, ideologically or otherwise, but it does not automatically lead to a loss in teaching effectiveness. Teaching and learning objectives can be maintained but they might be achieved through a number (as opposed to a single) communication and interaction routes." Banner (2003) recommended the lecturers teaching the international students "...not to forget that the student, who is sitting quiet in your classroom, not making eye contact, not venturing opinions, might well be exhibiting the positive characteristics of an excellent student in his or her culture. Make sure in your teaching that you take into account the needs of the quiet students as well as the noisy, demanding, responsive one." This sounds challenging for lecturers. However, this is particularly true of lecturers to be aware of the fact that when tensions and confrontations arise in a multi-cultural environment due to assumptions as to what constitutes appropriate behaviour in a given context.

The above personal experience can directly inform those with stimulus, who have been silent in class of how invaluable the passive participation has served them in many ways in the past and now. To some extent, it can benefit the international students, as it might make them more aware of aspects of their own culture as well as the new culture that they have entered and merged into. I hope that it will benefit the international education as well.

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