A FIELD STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION TO CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS

Uluslararası Öğrencilerin Sınıf İçi Tartışmalarına Katılımı: Bir Alan Çalışması

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ABSTRACT

The graduate classrooms in US universities are one of the most culturally diverse educational settings in the world, representing very different cultures. Each student in such a multicultural setting must differ in his approach to educational practices carried out in the classroom. Participation to discussions is one of them. This study aimed to explore how international graduate students studying at a US university contribute to classroom discussions and how and why they differ from their American counterparts. Therefore, a graduate seminar was observed for eight weeks. Results of qualitative analysis revealed that international students differ from their American classmates in their participation to classroom discussions in "patterns of turn taking" and "patterns of participation and its quality" due to cultural differences. It was concluded that international students should be supported in their struggle to adapt to the expectations of the new culture for them to become successful in culturally-diverse settings.

Key words: International Students, Cultural Diversity, Educational Practices, Classroom Discussions.

ÖZET

ABD üniversitelerindeki lisansüstü ders verilen sınıflar birçok farklı kültürü temsil ettiklerinden dünyanın kültürel açıdan en çok çeşitlilik gösteren eğitim ortamlarından birini oluştururlar. Bu tür çok kültürlü ortamlardaki her bir öğrencinin eğitim faaliyetlerine yaklaşımı farklı olmalıdır. Sınıf tartışmalarına katılım bu faaliyetlerden biridir. Bu çalışma, ABD'deki bir üniversitede uluslar arası lisansüstü eğitim gören öğrencilerin sınıf tartışmalarına nasıl katıldığını ve nasıl ve neden Amerikan öğrencilerden farklılık gösterdiklerini araştırmayı amaçlamıştır. Bu nedenle, lisansüstü bir seminer dersi sekiz hafta boyunca gözlenmiştir. Niteliksel analiz sonuçları uluslar arası öğrencilerin sınıf tartışmalarına katılmada Amerikalı öğrencilerden "söz alma şekilleri" ve "katılım şekilleri ve kalitesi" açısından farklılık gösterdiklerini ortaya çıkarmıştır. Uluslar arası öğrencilerin çok kültürlü ortamlarda başarılı olabilmeleri için yeni kültürün beklentilerine uyum sağlamaya çalışırken verdikleri mücadelede desteklenmeleri gerektiği sonucuna varılmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Uluslar arası Öğrenciler, Kültürel Çeşitlilik, Eğitim Faaliyetleri, Sınıf Tartışmaları.

1. INTRODUCTION

Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) define culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (p. 4). It consists of learned values (e.g., notions of modesty, concept of friendship), patterns of behavior (e.g., gestures, facial expressions), and meanings (e.g., concept of beauty, religious rituals) which are shared by members of one group and used as a guide to organize lives. Culture shapes and defines every act of individuals and societies. Educational practices are one of them. Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2006) state that "Culture provides the tools to pursue the search for meaning and to convey our understanding to others. Consequently, communication cannot exist without culture, culture cannot be known without communication, and teaching and learning cannot occur without communication or culture" (p. 326).

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International students, studying in any culturally diverse educational setting –in this case in a US university- bring their own cultural values and beliefs and act how they are raised and trained in their own cultures. They soon discover that their way may not work in such multicultural classrooms as their expectations from a course, a professor or even from themselves might be strikingly different than what their professors expect from them. For example, participating into classroom discussions is one of the major expectations of American professors. Thus, there is always a "participation" section in their courses syllabuses to which a certain portion of the total grade is attached. However, classroom discussions might be something new and very difficult to adapt for the international students, especially for the ones who come from collectivist and high-power distance cultures.

In this paper, I reveal the differences between international students' participation in classroom discussions and that of their American classmates. I focus on differences between international and American students' behaviors in terms of patterns of turn-taking and patterns of participation and its quality. I argue that cultural differences in terms of educational practices (in this case, patterns of participation and turn-taking during classroom discussions) might have a significant effect on the success of international graduate students studying at US universities. I conclude with suggestions for international students, their professors and American classmates who can together create a more productive academic atmosphere.

2. ROOTS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Bock (1970) defines culture shock as a "disturbing feeling of disorientation and helplessness" when one is directly exposed "to an alien society" (p. ix). He also asserts that "the more 'exotic' the alien society and the deeper one's immersion in its social life, the greater the shock" (p. ix) which results in a more difficult adaptation to the new culture.

Cultures are identified by and examined under different dimensions which can be put into a table as follows:

Dimension	One Extreme	The Other Extreme
Context The degree to which communication is explicit and verbal or implicit and nonverbal.	Low Context Directness and freedom of speech are core values. Non-verbal traits are literal meaning, specific details and precise time schedules.	High Context Indirectness and silence are core values. Non-verbal trait is the information which is embedded in the physical context or internalized in the person.
Identity The degree the society reinforces individual or collective achievement and interpersonal relationships.	Individualism Individual freedom is the core value. Non-verbal traits are proximal distance, expression of emotions, etc.	Collectivism Group harmony is the core value. Non-verbal traits are proximal closeness, coordinated facial expressions and body movements.
Power Distance The degree of equality or inequality between people in the country or society.	Low Power Distance People's equality is the core value. Non-verbal traits are more tactile, relaxing and clear vocalic cues.	High Power Distance Respect for the status is the core value. Non-verbal traits are untouchable, regulated nonverbal displays.
Gender The degree of traditional gender role of achievement, control, and power.	Femininity Caring for others is the core value. Relaxed and coordinated vocal patterns, nurturing are non-verbal traits.	Masculinity Material success is the core value. High level of stress, loudness and aggressiveness are non-verbal traits.
Uncertainty The degree of avoidance or tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity within the society.	Uncertainty Avoidance Core value is the certainty: what is different is dangerous. Non-verbal traits are more emotional displays and higher level of anxiety.	Uncertainty Tolerance Core value is exploration: what is different causes curiosity. Being more positive and friendly to strangers are non-verbal traits.
Immediacy The degree of closeness, intimacy, and availability for communication.	Low Contact Core value is that public and body contacts are not comfortable. Non-verbal traits are standing apart and touching less.	High Contact Core value is that body contacts are signals for friendliness and communication. Non-verbal traits are standing closer together and touching more.

Adopted and modified from: Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel (2006, p. 250-266)

The cultural distance between one's own culture and the new culture (for example, degree of individualism and/or collectivism, structure of relations within family, relatives, friends, at work, at school) plays a very important role in determining the degree of distress in the adaptation process: "The differences in values (social, moral, work, and so on) that exist among many cultures have been used to account for the misunderstandings, distress, and difficulties experienced by cross-cultural sojourners" (Kim & Gudykunst, 1987, p. 56).

According to Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), US culture is highly individualistic and masculine which has low power distance and weak uncertainty avoidance features. It also falls into the category of low context cultures where direct communication is preferred and valued. It is clear that international students who are members of, for example, collectivist and high-power distance cultures have hard times to adapt to educational practices in the American culture.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Most of the research conducted to reveal cross-cultural differences in educational settings and difficulties that international students face because of such differences are case studies and surveys. Those studies cover a wide range of focus areas: teacher-student interaction at the university level (Goodman, 1994), international students and their advisors (Pedersen, 1994), cultural thought patterns in intercultural education (Kaplan, 1966; Kubota, 1998), and effects of culture in the development of academic literacy skills (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Braine, 2002; Spack, 1997).

In his study of "Intercultural Education at the University Level: Teacher-Student Interaction," Goodman (1994) introduces three case studies from Japan, Nigeria, and Korea and discusses cross-cultural clashes that happen when expectations of professors and students do not match. He explains the reasons of those cross-cultural clashes by referring to dimensions of national cultures (individualism vs. collectivism, high-power distance vs. low-power distance, masculinity vs. femininity, and high vs. low uncertainty avoidance) as also given in the table above. He emphasizes three important differences in the light of the case studies. First one is how achievement is perceived in two different cultures (the American and Japanese cultures in this case). He states that "inducements to compete and succeed *as individuals* permeate the educational systems and the society" (p. 142, italics original) in the US; however, "calling attention to oneself through individual initiative for individual rewards is not the ideal" (p. 142) in collectivist cultures such as Japan. The second one is how power plays a role in behaviors of professors and students. He states that in low-power distance cultures, such as US culture, "open displays of power is avoided,…and the give and take of a good intellectual debate in class between the professor and students is often seen as a very desirable outcome" (p. 143) whereas in high-power distance cultures students are expected to "speak up when invited to do so by the teacher and teachers are *never* corrected, contradicted or criticized in public" (p. 143, italics original). The third one is the degree of importance of "losing face." Goodman (1994) states that American students have a low sense of "losing face" and thus do not fear giving a "wrong answer." On the other hand, students from collectivist cultures tend to save face and do not contribute unless they are sure that they have the right answer. He concludes by urging the professors who are teaching multi-cultural classrooms to consider the fact that "all course materials and teaching methods are culture-bound" (p. 146) as well as their beliefs and expectations.

This paper examines such cross-cultural differences occurring during classroom discussions and reveals patterns how international students and their American classmates differ when they take turns and participate into the discussions.

4. METHOD

4.1. Data Collection

The goal of this paper is to reveal the differences between international students' participation in classroom discussions and that of their American classmates which might have a significant affect on the success of international graduate students studying at US universities. The method used to collect data for this study is complete participant observation as I observed one of the doctoral classes I was taking. I made a series of eight observations during which I recorded what was taking place by paper and pen.

To capture the big picture first, I initially started with doing a general observation of how class was proceeding. First, I made notes of how seating was arranged, who sat where, whether there was any preference or tendency for the international students to take specific seats each week, how class started and proceeded, and how comfortable the international students looked. I also observed how professor approached to all students, whether or not he helped to create an encouraging atmosphere to raise opinions. Then I focused on how much international students participated into the classroom discussions, how they took the floor to speak, and what the quality of their participation was (Were they only elaborating what had been said? Were they making a novel contribution?). As it was impossible to explain the patterns without including their American counterparts, I also observed the behaviors of American students as well.

I took notes as detailed as possible during the class and went over those during the breaks. I also tried to be consistent to spare some time after each class I observed to extend my records and fill in them with what I could not write down during the classes.

4.2. Participants

There were seventeen students taking the course: eight American students and nine international students including myself. Among nine international students, one was from Ghana, two (including myself) were from Turkey, one from Taiwan, and five from South Korea. It is important to note that all international students in the class were coming from collectivist and high-power distance cultures.

4.3. Setting

The course was given once a week and lasted two hours and forty minutes. Attendance was required for the class. It was also required to post reflections on the online-discussion board each week before the class, respond at least two other classmates' reflections, read everyone's reflections and responds, and come class prepared to "participate actively" in classroom discussions. It was quite clear on the course syllabus that discussion would constitute the major part of this doctoral seminar.

4.4. Data Analysis

The data was qualitatively analyzed which resembles a spiral model as suggested by Creswell (2007). The data was underlined, highlighted, annotated, cross-checked, and categorized according to clusters. I focused on recurring patterns during analysis. There were two main patterns that I found worth to pursue exploring: patterns of turn-taking and patterns of participating into the classroom discussions and its quality. These patterns were strikingly different for international students and their American classmates.

5. FINDINGS

As seen above, American culture is strikingly different from collectivist, high-power distance, and high uncertainty avoidance cultures. These dimensional differences are reflected in educational practices as well and they have significant effects on international students' success. For example, as Goodman (1994) emphasizes, classroom discussions are an inherent part of American graduate classes where everyone is expected to speak up and contribute to the intellectual growing of each other. International students who come from cultures where they are expected to sit dutifully and absorb the knowledge transmitted by the teacher may find it hard to participate in discussions. I will discuss the patterns how international students and their American classmates take turns and participate in classroom discussions and the quality of those participations. I will argue that differences in those patterns affect the success of international students in the US classrooms.

5.1. Patterns of Turn-Taking

As mentioned above, there are seventeen students in the class who sit in a U position so that they can all see each other easily. On the right hand side of the U shape seven international students sit in line next to each other. Two of them sit among American students on the left hand side. Except for a few students, everyone in the class tended to sit at the exact same places each week.

For the first few minutes of the each class, the professor makes necessary announcements (if there is any) and highlights the most controversial issues discussed on the online discussion board. He lets the class to get into pairs and/or groups, however the students wish, and have a preliminary discussion among themselves about the issues arose from readings of that week for about 15 minutes before he pulls everyone back to have a whole-class discussion. It was during these whole class discussions where patterns generally emerge.

There were three patterns of turn-taking: a) interrupting, b) giving signals, and c) raising hands. All these three patterns were observed both in international students' and their American classmates' behaviors. However, there were differences in how many times each strategy to take turns were used by international and American students.

American students tended to jump into the discussion quite naturally whenever they felt there was something they needed to say. They interrupted each other quite often for short comments like "yes, that's right", "well… yeah… but…", "well… for me…" or for longer articulation of novel ideas. This strategy of turn-taking was used significantly less by international students. Most of the time they waited until the speaker was finished to take the turn and then they started to comment on the topic being discussed. Interpersonal relations are valued in collectivist cultures and thus it is important to make sure the speaker is finished before taking the turn to speak (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005).

Giving verbal signals like "well…, ok but…, and…" and waiting to be given the floor after the speaker stops was another strategy employed both by international and American students but not equally. Again, American students used such strategies more often than international students did. In addition to giving verbal signals, Asian students used another unique way of letting others realize that they wanted to take the turn to speak: clearing throat loudly. It was observed that this unique way was used several times by particularly three female Asian students.

The most common strategy used by international students and the least one for their American classmates was raising hands to take turns in the discussion. International students raised their hands to take turns approximately four times more than that of their American counterparts. However, there were times where I observed that it was not the best strategy to employ as it went unnoticed because of the rapid turn taking by American students through interruptions.

The rapid turn-taking by American students and flow of ideas which resulted in changing the topic quite frequently caused difficulties on the part of the international students. Once, one of the international students sitting next to me whispered and said "You know… my fiancé's experiences might be a very good example" and I said "Why don't you tell it then?" She looked at the others and said "Never mind… They're already talking about something else!"

The mismatch between the use of strategies to take turns by international and American students was the reason for international students to contribute less into the classroom discussions. During one of the classes, students took turns and participated into the discussion twenty-nine times. Only ten times international students participated into the discussion and four of the ten were questions raised for clarification of the previous questions or comments. In another class, American students took twenty-five turns to participate while international students took only four turns. Only one of the four was a voluntary participation while the other three resulted from specifically directed questions to international students themselves.

5.2. Patterns of Participation and its Quality

There were four patterns of participation during classroom discussions employed both by international students and their American classmates. These patterns were: a) articulation of novel ideas, b) commenting on or elaborating previous idea/s, c) asking questions, and d) answering questions directed to students. However, again, even though the patterns were the same for both international and American students, there were differences in how many times each one was used by specific groups of students.

International students articulated fewer novel ideas than their American classmates. When they did so, they mainly (about 85%) talked about their past experiences or cultures and/or countries which they can directly relate to themselves. They generally make comments on previously stated idea/s or elaborated them. They rarely asked questions either to the professor or classmates but they provided answers to the questions directed to them (almost 100%).

On the other hand, American students articulated more novel ideas which were directly related to the issues raised for discussion. They made more comments to contradict or support previously stated idea/s. They were raising more questions either to the professor and/or their classmates. There were no significant differences in how they employ all those patterns stated above as they more or less utilized each one in the same quantity; though, they differed from the international students.

It was also observed that international students rarely contradicted to the professor or classmates during discussions. They also raised fewer questions as noted above. The reasons why international students fail to contribute to the classroom discussions significantly both in quantity and quality will be discussed in the next section.

It is crucial to mention that there are also individual differences. There was one American student who could easily fall into the same category with the international students as she showed the same patterns not in turn taking but in participation patterns. There was also one international student who was remarkably different than all the rest. His behaviors of turn taking and participating into classroom discussions were more like American students. I assume the key was time and practice as he has been living in the US for about fifteen years and had his undergraduate and masters degrees in the US.

6. DISCUSSION

Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) state that in high-power distance cultures "the educational process is teacher-centered…with the teacher initiating all communication" (p. 53). International

students coming from such cultures are used to sitting quietly and listening to the professor lecturing for hours so it is not easy for them to adapt into a new educational culture where they are expected to speak up and share their own opinions. They struggle a lot to figure out how to take turns, what to say, and how to say it.

When they want to a take turn to participate into the classroom discussion, international students generally raise their hands and wait to be seen and given floor to speak next. However, their effort may go unnoticed and they may lose the chance to contribute to the discussion. They also use verbal signals to indicate that they wish to take the floor to speak but it seems that nothing works to keep up with rapid turn takings through interruptions by American classmates.

Not being able to keep up with the turn taking also affects how international students participate into the discussions and the quality of those participations. As one of the international students stated on the online discussion board that it is very difficult to follow where the discussion goes due to the rapid exchange between American students. That might be the reason why international students articulate fewer novel ideas during discussions and prefer to elaborate on the previous ones so that they secure themselves from losing face by saying something wrong (Goodman, 1994; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Moreover, they rarely raise questions to the professor or their classmates because of the very same reason.

In classroom discussions, it is crucial to raise questions because questions have the potential to trigger an intellectual debate. Moreover, contradictions are more productive than agreements. However, Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) state that "teachers are never publicly contradicted or criticized" (p. 53) in high power distance cultures as they hold a higher status in the society. If a graduate student comes from a high power distance culture, he/she might find very hard to contradict the professor and/or their classmates.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Adaptation to a new culture does not mean that one needs to abandon his/her identity or own cultural values but that he/she needs to create a "thirdspace" where he/she can create new meanings and understandings towards the new culture (Hall, Vitanova & Marchenkova, 2005). It is crucial for the foreign students who seek academic success in the US as they need to be mentally stress-free in order to succeed. The basis for the creation of a "thirdspace" may be founded by professors at graduate schools, international students themselves, and their American classmates who value the importance of dialog and developing an understanding of differences.

International students who come to the US seeking academic degrees at US universities bring cultural values with them most of which are quite different from American ones. These cultural values might be very problematic for them and cause them to be less successful in courses. Dialog is the best way that may be stimulated to help international students at US universities. Thus, professors at graduate schools and American students should be equipped with necessary knowledge about culture/s as their classrooms are growing more in diversity every year. They need to be aware of the fact that "An increased consciousness of the constraints of our mental programs versus those of others is essential for our common survival. … such a consciousness can be developed and that while we should not expect to become all alike, we can at least aspire at becoming more cosmopolitan in our thinking" (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005, p. 365).

Understanding the struggles and difficulties most international students face by their professors and American classmates may lead to creation of a more productive intellectual atmosphere in graduate classes as everyone has something unique and genuine to share. Being more alert to the signals given by international students to participate into the classroom discussions and giving them

more time to articulate what they want to share might be a good beginning until international students get used to rapid turn takings and fast exchange of ideas. Thus, "their transition to an alien academic system" (Lee, 1997, p. 93) might be smoother.

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