

Some Observations of Students' Reticent and Participatory Behaviour in Hong Kong English Classrooms¹

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Abstract

This article attempts to investigate students' oral participation behaviour in some junior secondary classrooms of English in Hong Kong. Through a case study method, intensive classroom observations were carried out during three consecutive school years. Data collected through the study such as classroom observation notes, video transcriptions, student interviews and informal conversations were analysed. It is found that while students were quiet and passive at the beginning of the fieldwork period, students were ready to express their own opinions at some other time. The findings suggest that Asian students' quietness and willingness to communicate orally can be attributed to a range of factors, including student affect, their language proficiency, and immediate pedagogical contexts. This article closes with a discussion of the implications for better teaching and more effective second/foreign learning.

1 Introduction

Student oral participation in English as a foreign/second language (EFL/ESL) classrooms has become an issue since the introduction of communicative language teaching in the 1970s. Students are expected to be involved in interactive and co-operative learning tasks (Biggs & Moore, 1993; Van den Branden, Bygate, & Norris, 2009). Research findings indicate that many Asian students are unwilling to be engaged in oral activities in English lessons. The objectives of this article are: 1) to identify some of the situations when Hong Kong junior secondary students are reticent and the possible reasons; 2) to identify situations when the students are active and participatory and the possible reasons.

This article will first review some previous studies of students' participatory and reticent behaviour in English lessons. It will then describe a study of students' classroom behaviour, in which 181 Hong Kong secondary students participated. The findings will be presented according to the situations when the students were quiet and when they were willing to participate in classroom activities. Some plausible causes of these behaviours will be discussed. The paper will then look at the implications of the findings.

2 Students' participatory behaviour in English classrooms

The ESL education community advocates students' oral participation in language classrooms (e.g. Finocchiao & Brumfit, 1983; Long & Porter, 1985; Long, 1996; Liu, 2001) and comprehensible output (e.g. Swain, 1985; Mackey, 2002). According to Swain (1985), language learning is more effective when the target language is used, particularly in regard to understanding the language in general, and enhancing their reading or listening skills in particular. Students' oral par-

ticipation can help students fill the gap between what they want to say and whether they are able to say it. Furthermore, it is a common belief that “participation in verbal interaction offers language learners the opportunity to follow up on new words and structures to which they have been exposed during language lessons and to practice them in context” (Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos, & Linnell, 1996, pp. 59–60). All these provide students with a motivation to practise and improve.

The application and effectiveness of students’ oral participation in pair or group work are reported widely (e.g. Samuda & Bruton, 1981; Heath, 1982; Long & Porter, 1985; Littlejohn, 1987; Jacobs & Ramanida, 1996; Liu & Jackson, 2009). On the basis of the papers they reviewed, Long and Porter (1985) found that when second language learners worked in groups, they were more motivated, took more initiative, and were less anxious concerning their learning. They would produce more language, which contained various kinds of sociolinguistic functions. In addition to the proposal that the production of the target language helps to enhance students’ fluency, practice may make perfect. As Long (1996) says, production “can push learners to analyse input grammatically, with accuracy also increased by the negative feedback that verbal hypothesis testing elicits” (p. 447). The elicitation of student responses in language classrooms is of interest to researchers’.

There may be a relationship between student oral participation and teachers’ questioning techniques (Wei, 2008) and types of classroom activities (Liu, 2006; Wei, 2008; Liu & Jackson, 2009). Wei (2008) found from his action research project that “students’ oral participation is increased if application and presentation activities are used; the right vocabulary is offered when students need it to continue; questions related to students’ prior experiences are asked; and an informal and friendly classroom atmosphere is present” (p. 169). The researcher also elaborated the significance of teacher questioning in his discussion. With timely and necessary vocabulary support, teachers’ questions will encourage students to continue talking because “for ESL/EFL students, questions are not the only way to elicit responses” (p. 180).

There have been attempts to enhance students’ willingness to participate in oral activities in English lessons through the teaching of classroom language (e.g. Tsou, 2005). The researcher carried out a study to find out the effects of instruction about classroom participation on students’ oral participation in class and speaking proficiency. The project involved two English enhancement classes for first-year undergraduates. Both qualitative and quantitative findings supported the propositions that instruction about classroom participation can “increase students’ oral participation in class, and lead to the improvement of students’ speaking proficiency” (p. 46). Liu and Jackson (2009) reported that the willingness of the mainland Chinese first-year undergraduates to participate in oral activities was linked to their language abilities: “The more proficient in English the students were, the more willing they were to participate in speech communication and the more positive they were about it” (p. 78).

3 Students’ reticent behaviour in English classrooms

Asian students are very often seen as quiet or silent in English lessons. Then, what is silence in an oral communication? Bilmes (1994) suggests that silence can be as basic as a substance “between sounds and before sound” (p. 73). It may mean a great deal in human interactions (Jaworski & Sachdev, 1998). Silence includes “the simple absence of sound” and “the relevant absence of a particular kind of sound” (Bilmes, 1994, pp.73–74). The kind of silence many language teachers are concerned about involves “a subtype of notable silence” – “conversational silence” (Bilmes, 1994, p. 74). “The distinction between absolute and conversational silence is not a social scientific invention” (Bilmes, 1994, p. 74). Searles (cited by Bilmes, 1994) differentiates “regulative rules, rules that ‘regulate antecedently or independently existing forms of behavior’” from “constitutive rules, which ‘creates or define new forms of behavior’” (p. 75). It is difficult to categorise conversational rules by applying this distinction (Bilmes, 1994).

It is suggested that silence in conversations can be attributed to various causes, such as general shyness (Jones, 1999; Phillips, 1997). Other causes of reticent behavior may include:

- defective learning in the family;
- socially traumatic experiences in schools;
- an experience that is distressing;
- parental influence;
- economic, social, ethnic, rural/urban minority groups;
- learning the social styles of an unfamiliar group

(extracted from Phillips, 1997, p. 132)

Tim Hopf (cited by Phillips, 1997) expresses the view that people will choose to remain silence when “they feel they will lose more by talking than by remaining silent” (p. 134) and “they know they cannot succeed at speaking and adopt a pattern of avoidance of social contact with others” (p. 135).

Asian students' timid classroom responses in English lessons have been documented widely. Dick and Robinson (1995) reported that Malaysian students “preferred not to say anything during lecture discussion sessions. If an instructor asked a general question, the classes became deadly silent” (p. 5). Korean students “speak only when invited by their instructors” and “the professors also regard those who don't ask any questions as very good students” (p. 268). Japanese students are “nervous about asking questions in class” because they are unsure if a question was appropriate and they would choose “to ask questions after class, only with teachers” (Chen, 2003, p. 267). McDaniel (1993) studied Japanese non-verbal communication and explained that Japan is a culture which emphasises social harmony. This in turn has led to the use of non-verbal communication and junior members have become passive as a result.

Cheng (1998), in her article discussing ways to meet the educational needs of newly arrived Asian Pacific American (APA) students, observed among others that APA students seem to give “short responses” or exhibit null participation (p. 3) in class. Sato (1982) found that university ESL teachers involved in her study tend to ask more non-Asian students to respond to their questions. This implies that the teachers might perceive Asian students as less willing to participate orally in classes.

Some tertiary students in China presume that teachers should know their students' problems, and that students are not supposed to ask any questions (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Anderson (1993) cited a teacher saying that Chinese students were reluctant to speak and participate in class activities in English lessons. The students “refused to sit in a circle and speak English to each other. They don't like to invent conversations or play communication games” (p. 474). Liu and Jackson (2009) reported that mainland Chinese first-year undergraduates were usually found to be quiet in English classes.

4 Hong Kong students' quiet and passive behavior in content and English lessons

Research findings indicate that Hong Kong students tend to be quiet and passive in both content and English classrooms (e.g. Flowerdew & Miller, 1996; Jackson, 2002; Tsui, 1985, 1996). In Hong Kong, some university lecturers teaching content subjects feel frustrated by students' slow reactions and unwillingness to respond to lecturers' questions (Flowerdew & Miller, 1996). An expatriate lecturer in a Hong Kong tertiary institution voiced his concern about students' lack of oral participation in English classes in a job interview I attended. He asked me, ‘How will you encourage quiet students to participate in English lessons?’. My responses to the question will be discussed in the Implication section of this article.

Lai (1994) attempted to identify Hong Kong secondary students' level of confidence in using English and the factors leading to different confidence levels in oral participation in classrooms. The findings show that most of the subjects “felt a lack of confidence in using English as a means of communication in the classroom” (Lai, 1994, p. 122). The students' avoidance of oral communication may be related to their own confidence (Oxford, 1999) or self-esteem (de Andris, 1999; de Porter, 1995; Reasoner, 1992). The students' lack of confidence may perhaps be attributed to the

emphasis given to receptive language skills in Hong Kong (Biggs, 1994).

Students are nervous when they are asked to answer questions in classes. Activities that require students to be “singled out to answer questions [...] were the most anxiety-provoking” (Liu, 2006, p. 311) in English lessons ‘because [students] worried about their English proficiency and feared making mistakes’ (Liu, 2006, p. 312). Students are anxious about being seen as inadequate if they make errors (Aida, 1994).

In her study of students’ reticent behavior in English business case discussion, Jackson (2002) interviewed some Hong Kong university students, who provided an array of reasons for their quietness, ranging from their “fear of making mistakes, laziness, reluctance to be the center of attention”, “lack of confidence, the language barrier”, “fear of losing face” to “anxiety when speaking in large classes, preference for small groups” (p. 76).

Students are expected to be interactive in English language classes and, as discussed above, there have been attempts to find out when students are more willing to participate in interactive activities and how to encourage students’ oral participation. Hong Kong students have been reported to be quiet and passive in both content and English lessons. Some causes of student reticence have been discussed. Based on this background, a study was conducted to identify Hong Kong secondary students’ classroom behaviour patterns.

5 The study and procedures

The discussion in this article is based on parts of a 3-year case study that centres on the Hong Kong junior secondary English classroom culture. There were in total 181 students aged 12–15 involved. Six junior secondary classes from two schools participated in the study. Each of these six classes was visited regularly for one school year between September and June/July the following year. Throughout these three school years, two to four of their English lessons were observed each week. The lessons lasted 35 or 70 minutes, i.e. a single or double periods, respectively. Students of the six classes, who were taught by two Hong Kong teachers sharing the same mother tongue as the students, were from the three junior secondary levels, i.e. Secondary 1 to Secondary 3. The six classes are labelled as Sites 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 in accordance with the chronological order of the first visit. There was one class of Secondary One students (12-year-olds), namely Site 5, two classes of Secondary Two students (13-year-olds), namely Sites 3 and 4, and three classes of Secondary Three students (14-year-olds), namely Sites 1, 2 and 6.

In order to gain access to the schools, the research objectives and procedures were explained to the schools and the stakeholders’ concerns were also addressed. During classroom observation, the researcher took observation notes. In addition to the classroom observations, multiple data collection tools were adopted in the research procedures, including video-recording, opportunistic conversations and semi-structured interviews. Selected lessons were video-recorded and the class happenings were transcribed by the researcher afterwards. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with volunteer students in groups of 4–6 at an average frequency of 2 interviews per school year. Each interview lasted about 45–90 minutes and was conducted after school. The topics discussed were related to the research topic and some of the observed classroom events. Some of the discussion were initiated by students. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed afterwards. Opportunistic conversations were held immediately after some of the observed lessons. They were aimed at eliciting the students’ immediate views on some of the class events that were significant to the research.

The research design adopted was also aimed at confirming the validity of the data obtained. In order to enhance the confidence in the conclusions of this research, a longitudinal research design adopted, which prescribed that the same settings were visited and referred to throughout the course of study. Similar participants, including the students, and their behaviour were observed and recorded at different points of time. The participants’ attitude and thinking were inferred through interviews and conversations. By so doing, the data collected at different times and from different participants can be juxtaposed from different perspectives.

For qualitative casework, such a procedure to reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation is called triangulation. The term triangulation has its origin in surveying. Triangulation helps qualitative researchers identify and describe patterns and interpret meanings (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2009; Stake, 2005; Tesch, 1990). Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) acknowledge the importance of the use of multiple data sources with the following words:

This avoids the risks that stem from reliance on a single kind of data: the possibility that one's findings are method-dependent. The multi-stranded character of ethnography provides the basis for triangulation (p. 24).

During the analysis, the classroom observation notes, being a major source of data, were triangulated and interconnected with the other data sources, e.g. interviews, conversations and video-recording. Through the data collection process above and detailed, in-depth description of students' role and behaviour, "a deepened, complex and thoroughly partial understanding" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963) of the elements required for better teaching and better learning in ESL classrooms can be identified.

In this article, a total of 16 excerpts will be discussed and the extracts were taken from a range of lessons, including: Listening, Reader, Coursebook and Composition.

6 Findings and discussion

I will first present and discuss data that show some students' quiet and passive classroom behaviour. Then data showing students' participative classroom behaviour will be presented.

6.1 *Reticent students*

The following three excerpts are from the observation notes taken when I visited the classes for the first time.

Excerpt 1

It was my first visit to Site 2 and it was a double lesson of Listening. [...] The teacher introduced me, in Cantonese, to the students during the break. I told the students what my research was about. At the end of my introduction, I expressed my best wishes for their progress in their studies this year. The students responded with a big smile. They then clapped hands. [...] When the teacher played the tape, the students listened to it. None spoke. Some of the students wrote the answers in their Listening exercise book. When the teacher wrote the answers on the board, everyone in the class wrote them down. (Observation 1, Site 2)

Excerpt 2

This was the first time I visited Site 3. The English lesson was scheduled after the recess. I went into the classroom with the teacher. The students were surprised and they looked at one another. I was sitting at the back of the classroom. Some of the students turned round, looked at me and talked softly among themselves. The students gradually calmed down. [...] (Observation 1, Site 3)

Excerpt 3

It was the first time I visited this class. I arrived at the classroom early. I, together with the students, waited for the teacher. I sat at the back of the classroom [I had observed another class in the same school in the previous year]. Some of the students turned round, looked at me and then whispered with their neighbours. Later, they were very quiet. (Observation 1, Site 6)

Excerpt 1 was recorded during my first visit to Site 2 (Observation 1, Site 2). Excerpts 2 and 3 were from my first visits to Sites 3 (Observation 1, Site 3) and Site 6 (Observation 1, Site 6). In Excerpt 1, I found that the students were interested in learning. This was apparent in two ways. First, when I expressed my best wishes to the students for their studies, they responded in a positive and hopeful manner. They showed their gratitude through their smiles and applause. This kind of response can be seen as a sign that they cared about learning. Second, when the tape was played,

the students listened and none spoke. This shows that the students concentrated on their studies. They were interested in improving their listening and language skills.

My first impression of the students in these three cases were that they were quiet. The students were asked to write the answers in their Listening exercise books while they listened to the tape. None spoke. In Excerpt 1, the students followed their teacher's instructions.

In Excerpt 2, the students were gradually settling down in class after the recess. In Excerpt 3, the students were very quiet in class. These 3 observations were conducted at the beginning of the school years. The students in these excerpts were attempting to work out the social styles of their peers (Phillips, 1997) and some of the students might be new to these classes. The students were in the process of finding out the "regulative rules" (Bilmes, 1994, p. 75) of the class.

The students' quiet and well-behaved responses might mirror the students' established view on classrooms and on learning. The students in these excerpts saw the classroom as a formal venue, in which good students need to keep quiet and behave well. While some students in Excerpts 2 and 3 whispered among themselves at different points of the observation, this did not cause any disciplinary problems. That students view classrooms as a formal venue was also observed in some other Asian contexts, e.g. Korea (Chen, 2003). Chen reported that Korean students rarely participated orally unless they were requested to do so. My initial impression of these students was that they were quiet, passive and well-behaved. They were also conforming to their teachers' instructions. The students were interested in learning.

6.2 *Students lacking confidence*

The following observation excerpts were from other occasions when the students were reticent.

Excerpt 4

This was a Reader lesson. The teacher asked the whole class: 'Any volunteers to read aloud this following paragraph?' The students immediately lowered their heads. No student had volunteered. The teacher had waited for about half a minute and he nominated a student to read it aloud. (Observation 3, Site 2)

Excerpt 5

The teacher wrote some of the new words on the blackboard. He then explained the meanings of the words. Then the teacher asked the students: "Any problems concerning vocabulary in the Reader?" Most of them kept quiet. A few of the students talked softly among themselves. None had asked any question. (Observation 5, Site 2)

Excerpt 4 was recorded when I visited Site 2 the third time (Observation 3, Site 2). In this excerpt, in response to the teacher's request for volunteers to read a paragraph aloud, the students lowered their heads. The teacher then nominated a student to read. Excerpt 5 was noted during my fifth visit to Site 2 (Observation 5, Site 2). In this excerpt, when the teacher asked the class if they had problems about the vocabulary in the Reader, none asked any question. Most of them kept quiet. The two episodes show that the students were quiet and passive. This kind of situation occurs in many Hong Kong classrooms (e.g. Flowerdew & Miller, 1996; Jackson, 2002; Lai, 1994; Tsui, 1985). For example, in a Hong Kong tertiary institution, "When a lecturer [...] asks a question of the class as a whole, it is very unlikely that anyone will volunteer an answer." (Flowerdew & Miller, 1996, p. 128).

The timid responses reported in Excerpt 5 reflect students' views about asking teachers questions. A Hong Kong student of mine said to me, "Their [students'] questions may only be their own but not the others. The class time will be wasted if they asked the questions." (student conversation, undated). The tertiary mainland Chinese students involved in Cortazzi and Jin's study (1996) thought that their teachers knew about their students' problems and so there was no need for the students to ask questions. Dick and Robinson (1995) reported that Malaysian students "preferred not to say anything during lecture discussion sessions. If an instructor asked a general question, the class became deadly silent" (p. 5). Students' decision to remain silent by can be re-

lated to students' affect and language abilities. If the students in Excerpt 4 volunteered, or if the students in Excerpt 5 chose to ask the teacher questions, the students would have to use English and their English abilities would have to be exposed to their teachers and the other classmates. It has been found that students were very anxious about speaking out singly in front of the whole class because they were concerned about their own language abilities (Aida, 1994; Liu, 2006). This indicates that the students in the two excerpts above lacked confidence. Their language competence adversely affected their desire to express their ideas. When Hong Kong students are asked to answer teachers' questions, they sometimes contribute orally in a soft voice. Speaking in a soft voice is a way for students to deal with their lack of confidence (Tong, 2004).

In Excerpt 5, although none of the students asked a question, several students talked softly among themselves. It may be that some students tried to solve one another's problems. This is evidence of students interacting among themselves orally. A similar kind of 'small talk' was observed in the Japanese classrooms. When the students were working with their exercises, "some students talk quietly to each other. [...] Those writing sought comment from their peers." (Holliday, 2003, p. 12). This informal talk does not seem to inhibit them from listening to the teacher at the same time. The students' personal conversations in Excerpt 5 show that the students were comfortable with talking quietly among themselves to meet their own needs while they felt unease at being put in a 'spotlight' when they were asked to talk individually in front of the whole class.

The kinds of oral activities students are expected to conduct will affect their enthusiasm towards oral participation in language classrooms (Wei, 2008). It was reported that only a few volunteered to respond to a teacher or give a presentation in front of the class (Liu & Jackson, 2009).

So far, the students were observed to be quiet and passive during the first few visits. The students were reticent when there were adverse effects on their confidence. Some students were seen to be engaged in personal conversations with each other. The students' quiet and passive behaviour observed can be as significant as their participative behaviour.

6.3 Participatory students

The students' initiative was manifested in how they answered their teachers' questions, and asked questions themselves.

6.3.1 Answering questions

The situations below indicate that some students attempted to answer teachers' questions. Amongst them, three were excerpts classroom observation notes and one was a video-recording extract.

Excerpt 6

The class was listening to the tape quietly. The teacher then asked the class the meaning of some of the words that had appeared in the recording. The teacher did not assign any student. Some students called out the meanings of the words and they were sitting in their seats. (Observation 12, Site 3)

Excerpt 7

For the last task of the listening exercise, the teacher asked the students questions and some students called out the answers. (Observation 8, Site 2)

Excerpt 6 was recorded when I conducted my 12th visit to Site 3 and Excerpt 7 was from the 8th visit to Site 2. In both excerpts, the teachers asked the students questions and did not assign any particular student to answer them. Some students volunteered to respond to the questions. The students remained seated as they called out the answers.

Excerpt 8

This was a coursebook lesson. [...]The teacher asked the class: "When do we use the words 'more' or 'most'?" Several students replied: "To make comparison." Some students added: "[The adjectives in-

volved are] long words.” Some said: “More than three syllables.” When the students answered the question, they were sitting in their seats and called out the answers. (Observation 6, Site 3)

This observation (Excerpt 8) was made during the 6th visit to Site 3. The teacher asked a question about grammar: the use of “more” and “the most”. Some of the students attempted to answer the teacher’s question and provided the part of the answer they knew. The answer was not given by one student only. Instead, the students called out the part they knew and the others continued to provide another portion until a complete answer was given. The complete answer was “We use ‘more’ and ‘the most’ in comparison. The adjectives involved are long and consist of more than three syllables.” The teacher in the above excerpt did not assign any particular student to answer. The teacher asked the question and some of the students responded spontaneously and called out answers collectively from their seats. The students in this excerpt jointly gave the teacher a complete answer of the question.

The following is an extract from a video taken during the 5th visit to Site 6.

Excerpt 9

<p>T: What is it about between Line 1 and Line 17? S4: It’s about ... = = T: You tell me, S4. S4: Ah ... = = T: Very briefly ... S4: 81st Street. T: 81st Street and what else? S4: 81st Street and a driver. T: {The teacher raises her tone and addresses the question to the whole class.} Tell me the number of people appearing on this page. // Sss: One. // Sss: Two. T: How many people are there, S? What are the characters? {S does not respond verbally. S4 raises his hand hesitantly several times.} S4: John T: John, any other, the bus driver, any other? [...] S10: The female protagonist. Sss: Katie. T: Who is Katie? His [John’s] wife, right? That means, they are couples. Can anybody tell me where they live? It is mentioned here. S4: 81st Street. T: 81st Street. In which city? In which city? S4: New York T: New York, OK. The characters include John and his wife, Katie. They were taking bus back home ...</p>

(video, 5th visit, Site 6)

Please refer to the endnotes for the legends.²

The teacher asked her students questions about the content of the story. While the teacher nominated some students to answer the questions, other students also voluntarily answered them. In the whole course, the students remained seated when they replied.

The student, S4, was nominated to answer the first question by the teacher. S4 took the lead in the discussion with assistance of the teacher. Then the teacher directed questions to the whole class. Some students volunteered to answer the questions while seated. The questions were about the two characters of the story and the city they were living in. Using teacher-led questioning techniques, the teacher guided the class toward the expected answer: John and Katie lived in New York. It was reported that students’ oral participation is linked with teachers’ questioning skills (Wei, 2008).

Like in Excerpt 8, the expected answer to the teacher's question in this excerpt was completed after several students collectively made a number of attempts. This is evidence of the students' joint effort. A similar scene was observed in a Vietnam tertiary context. Kramsch and Sullivan (1996) report that the "whole class 'responds together', and that students call out 'answers' that often overlaps". The researchers contend that the "students 'build on each other's responses' in 'collective ways' " – a kind of "collaboration of the group as a whole" (p. 203). This kind of collaboration among students was also identified in Hong Kong. When the secondary students responded to their teachers' questions, they worked together and collaborated spontaneously to provide the answers. Also, when the students were completing a teacher-assigned writing task, they would seek assistance from their classmates, who readily offered it. This kind of collaboration is called 'spontaneous collaboration' (Tong, 2005).

This particular kind of student-teacher oral interaction suggests that the students in these episodes (Excerpts 6 to 9) tend to be more willing to contribute to the discussion when they are shielded by their peers, like those reported in Liu's (2006) study. In other words, when students are less visible, they will speak out.

6.3.2 Asking questions

The following observation notes show that the students took the initiative to ask teachers questions. One of the initiatives led to a follow-up student conversation and a discussion in a student interview.

Excerpt 10

It was a Listening lesson. The recording was about 'Athletics Finals'. The teacher began the lesson by explaining some of the vocabulary. Then the teacher played the tape and the students completed the exercises. [...] Several students raised their hands and asked questions about the recording. One of the students asked: 'What is the meaning of 'shot-put'?' (Observation 7, Site 1).

This observation note, taken during my 7th visit to Site 1 shows that the students asked questions about vocabulary in the teaching process. The topic of the Listening exercise was 'Athletics Finals', which was close to the students' school life. In the listening exercise book, a picture showed several students competing in different race or field events, for example, 800 metres, hurdles and shot put. In the schools I visited, there were sports days and swimming gala in each school year. This kind of real-life topic may have led to the students taking the initiative. This topic is also in line with the Hong Kong English curriculum design principles (Curriculum Development Council, 2002). It is recommended that teaching themes extend from pupils' direct experience (6–8 years old), for example, the pupils themselves, to their immediate environment (9–11 years old), for example, home life, to their school life (12–14 years old) and to the society and the world (15–17 years old) (cf. Estaire & Zanon, 1994). In this case, Site 1 was a class of Secondary Three students whose age was about 14. Their own experiences of sports day and swimming gala aroused their interest in this listening lesson.

Excerpt 11

It was a Reader lesson. The teacher selected and explained some vocabulary and wrote them on the blackboard. The teacher then gave the class the Chinese meaning of those words. Some of the students wrote the Chinese meaning by the English words in their books. Several students asked the teacher for the meanings of some words that the teacher had not chosen. For examples, "What is the meaning of 'continue', Sir?", "Sir, what about 'compare'?", "Sir, I don't know the meaning of 'behaviour'." and "Sir, I've forgotten the meaning of 'right thumb'." (Observation 25, Site 1)

Excerpt 12

The teacher returned the marked composition to the students. The students were correcting the composition in accordance with the teacher's marking. Some students raised their hands and asked: "How do we spell this word?" The teacher told them the spellings. (Observation 25, Site 3)

Excerpt 13

When the students were doing the exercise, they asked the teacher questions about the meanings of the words in the worksheet (Observation 26 Site 3).

Excerpts 11–13 were extracted from the observation notes of my 25th visit to Site 1 and 25th as well as 26th visits to Site 3. The students in these excerpts asked about word meanings and spelling that their teacher did not explain or the students were unsure about. The students' initiative indicates that they were willing to learn and to participate. In terms of question types, most of the questions were related to vocabulary. The students' concern may reflect the teachers' teaching focus.

On the occasions of Excerpts 10–13, the students asked the teachers questions when their classmates were working. For example, the class was completing exercises (Excerpt 10), writing the Chinese meanings of the English words in the book (Excerpt 11), correcting the composition (Excerpt 12), and doing exercises (Excerpt 13). These were moments when the teachers were free from teaching. Students raised their hands, or they went to the teacher's desk. In some cases, the teachers went to the students' desks, listened to their questions and answered the students' questions while their classmates were working. It was one-to-one interaction between teacher and student. The students felt comfortable and were not in the spotlight. Since some students believe that "their question may only be their own but not the others" and that class time would be wasted if they ask questions, the students in these excerpts capitalised on the opportunities when their classmates were occupied to ask their teachers questions.

In the observation note excerpt below, the students asked the teacher for the spelling of some new words and made a request.

Excerpt 14

After having listened to the tape in the Listening lesson, the teacher asked the class to answer the questions based on the tape. Some of the students noted down the answers in their own exercise books. The teacher played the tape again. The student sitting in front of me got the last and more difficult question correct. About three students in the very front requested for listening to the last sentence one more time. Several students asked for the spelling of the words. For example, one of the students asked: "Sir, how to spell 'designer'?" Some students tried to imitate the pronunciation of certain words in the tape. (Observation 34, Site 2)

The observation was conducted at the end of the school year and it was the 34th visit to Site 2. I find this to be a rich scenario because the students responded to the teacher's instructions, reacted to the tape contents and requested to re-listen to part of the tape. Answering the questions in written form indicates that the students had positive motivation towards completing the listening exercises. I observed that the students not only asked the teacher for the spelling of some words. They also imitated the pronunciation of some new words. They were interacting with the tape contents (cf. Thompson, 1996; Tong, in review). The students who participated in Cortazzi and Jin's study (1996) reported too that, in spite of a lack of oral interaction, they were engaging sometimes with the content non-verbally.

The students' request to have the last sentence replayed became a conversation topic between the group of students and myself after that lesson. The participants' attitude and thinking could be inferred from the conversation. During the conversation, I asked the group for their reasons for the request. One of the students provided an explanation:

Excerpt 15

Student: Yes, I asked the teacher to play the last sentence once again [...] cause I believe I would get the right answer. (Student conversation after Observation 34, Site 2)

Based on the students' request and explanation, I infer that the students took charge of their learning by asking their teacher to replay a certain part of the tape after they self-assessed what they had heard in the previous listening. In other words, after having listened to the tape, the stu-

dents assessed how many and which of the questions they could get correct answers as well as those they were unsure about. The students selected a method or strategy of making a request to listen to the last sentence again. The students' attempt to make a request was significant and was a kind of autonomous behaviour. The students suggested a way of completing the listening exercise and increasing their chances of getting the correct answers.

The students had attended English listening lessons for almost three years. The experience accumulated may have taught them how they can tackle the listening activities more effectively if part of the listening input could be played a second time. It was my 34th visit to the same site (Site 2) and this cumulative observation experience has led me to believe that the students' request to re-listening to some of the listening input shows that the students self-assessed and attempted to solve the problems themselves. Maxwell (2009, pp. 243–244) discusses the advantages of prolonged engagement at research sites. The students wanted to be independent from teachers and to exercise autonomy. More evidence of Hong Kong students' manifestation of autonomous behaviors has been reported elsewhere (e.g. Holliday, 2005; Tong, in review). The students' request to listen to part of the tape again and their explanation indicate that, in the process of listening, the students, to use the term in the local curriculum documents, took up the role of self-assessors (Curriculum Development Council, 1999, 2002; Curriculum Development Council and Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2007) to evaluate their listening abilities.

In a student interview, a group of students who volunteered to be interviewed voiced their opinions on the routines of their Listening lessons. One student said:

Excerpt 16

Student: After we have listened to the tapes, the teacher could have left some time for us to write down the answers. Then the teacher writes the answers on the blackboard. Or the teacher could play the tapes once more before we check the answers. Now, the teacher writes the answers on the blackboard or tells us the answers almost immediately after he has played the tape. (Student interview)

In this interview, the student suggested ways of enhancing the effectiveness of listening lessons, allowing students to complete the listening exercises and increasing their chances of getting correct answers. Their suggestions included: leaving students some time to write down answers, and teachers replaying the tape before showing the class the answers. In Excerpt 14, I observed that the teacher had played the tape twice. Some students requested the teacher to play the last sentence once more to confirm their answers. The students listened to the last sentence of the tape for a third time. The group of students in the conversation believed that this could help them to get the correct answers. The students' request was observed to be made at the end of the school term, when the students were familiar with the listening lesson setting, their classmates, their teacher and the researcher. They had got used to the classroom routines (Philips, 1997) and they could concentrate on the listening activities. When they believed they could get the correct answer if they could listen to the last sentence once more, they had the confidence to make a request to the teacher.

The observation (Excerpt 14), the conversation (Excerpt 15) and the interview (Excerpt 16) show that Hong Kong students "want to explore knowledge themselves and find their own answers" (Littlewood, 2000, p. 34). This episode is an evidence of students exercising autonomy when "learners are able to take charge of their own learning, [...] select methods and techniques and evaluate what has been acquired" (Littlewood, 1999, p. 75, citing Holec).

7 Implications and emerging issues

The findings reported in this paper show a complex learning and teaching situation, in which Hong Kong students are quiet and passive at certain times but participate orally at other times. An understanding of students' classroom behaviour patterns can inform teaching and enhance learning in the following aspects.

Students' non-verbal communication, gestures, body movement can be utilised as a resource (Wall, 2006). Students using body language was observed in this study, for example, lowering their

heads (Excerpt 4). Students' use of body language in English lessons was also reported in other studies (Liu, 2002; Tong, 2005). While, for various reasons, Chinese students are sometimes reticent, they had shown non-verbal hints of their "attentiveness, satisfaction, puzzlement, or disagreement" (Liu, 2002, p. 49). When teachers observe students' signals and ascertain that they need help, the teaching agenda can be paused and assistance is offered. This can be particularly useful to younger learners, who have limited language abilities.

Students' affective concerns influence their oral participation, for example, their anxiety and confidence as observed in Excerpts 4 and 5. In order to boost their confidence, a sufficient amount of time can be provided for students to organise their responses to teachers' questions or to formulate questions. I mentioned in the Introduction that a university lecturer was concerned about students' oral participation in a job interview and he asked me how we can encourage quiet students to participate in English lessons. At that time, I suggested that it would be useful to provide a longer wait-time. This suggestion was based on my own experience as a student in Britain. Many of my classmates, who were qualified practising teachers, were speakers of Japanese, Indonesian, Malaysian, Peruvian, African, German, Brazilian, Dutch, and Cantonese. English was not their mother tongue. While they had ideas, they very often needed time to find appropriate words and expressions. They also needed time to organise them and to translate from their mother tongue to English. I observed that before responding to the questions, my classmates had to think about what they wanted to contribute and then participated. If a period of wait-time were given, this would lead to more student oral participation. A period of wait-time can encourage oral responses from foreign language students.

Students can be allowed to discuss and compare notes with their classmates before they give responses. In this study, the students voiced their opinions more while their fellow students were working, for example, when doing exercises or completing compositions. Similarly, students were more willing to communicate verbally when they were not in the spotlight. Students talked softly among themselves and whispered with their peers. The students gave a complete answer to teachers' questions in a collective way. A group of students asked questions and made a request. These behaviors constitute evidence of students' joint efforts to solve problems. By so doing, students support one another and this will boost their confidence to speak out (cf. Tong, 2005). Arranging oral pair or group activities in English lessons has long been advocated (e.g. Samuda & Bruton, 1981; Heath, 1982; Jacobs & Ramanida, 1996; Littlejohn, 1987; Liu & Jackson, 2009; Littlewood, 2010). While pair or group work is in progress, students can ask teachers questions or clarify items with the teachers comfortably. When participating in pair/group work or asking teachers questions, students are 'pushed' to use the target language (Swain, 1985). When participating in pair or group work, or asking teachers questions, students are 'pushed' to use the target language (Swain, 1985).

Students were observed to orally communicate in English classes in the course of the study. In order to support student communications in English, teachers could make clear that student oral participation is an integral part of the teaching and learning processes at the beginning of the term/course. These can be allied with teachers' continuous encouragement or reminder for student oral participation. Teaching of conversation, for example, turn-taking skills (Curriculum Development Council, 2002, 2004; Curriculum Development Council and Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2007) can be useful. Silent behaviour and intonation patterns in turn-taking can be built in the pronunciation course. Students' attention can hence be drawn to the implications of silence in target language conversations. In addition, students' awareness of the intonation patterns in the conversational turn-taking processes can be raised. Tsou (2005) concludes that participation instruction will improve students' speaking proficiency, and also cultivate a positive attitude towards English lessons. Subsequently, students learn to spot the moments when they are to take turn in conversations.

8 Conclusion

This paper attempts to identify when Hong Kong junior secondary students are reticent and

when they are participative; and to provide some possible explanation. Students were initially observed to be passive and quiet. Students demonstrated an interest in improving listening and language skills. They cared about learning. Students' quietness and passiveness are attributed to affective factors, for example, a lack of confidence. The causes can be varied, including students' shyness, weak language skills, anxiety about making errors and being singled out. Students had been seen talking softly among themselves. There were occasions when students were participative. Students' active participation were manifested in responding to teachers' questions, and asking questions. After teachers had asked questions, students called out parts of the answers from their seats and provided a complete answer collectively. In the course of the study, students tended to be more willing to contribute to class discussion when they were less visible in class. Similarly, when students were shielded by their peers, they were more willing to speak out and ask teachers questions. Students was observed to imitate the pronunciation of some words when they were listening to a tape. At that moment, students were interacting with the tape contents. They had made a request to re-listen to part of the tape and this indicates that they were willing to learn. The students self-assessed their listening abilities and manifested a certain degree of student autonomy. The discussion reveals that while Hong Kong students are quiet and passive at times, they participate orally at other times. The student behaviour patterns are influenced by an array of factors. Several issues that need to be examined have been brought up in this paper. First, teachers can notice and capitalise on students' use of non-verbal communication, for example, when lowering their heads. Second, students can be provided with a brief wait-time so that they can better prepare their oral responses. Third, the arrangement of pair or group work may ease students' shyness, and anxiety about making errors. This can prevent students from being singled out when they voice their opinions. Fourth, the teaching of conversation can improve students' language abilities and encourage their oral participation in class.

The data discussed in this article are extracted from a three year qualitative longitudinal case study involving 181 students. The discussion centred on 13 observation notes, which were triangulated with a video, a conversation and an interview. The Hong Kong student classroom performance observed can provide a reference for teaching and researching other Asian students learning ESL/EFL in different parts of the world. Especially since there is an increasing number of Chinese students studying English overseas (Li, 2004), the discussion here has implications for the development of learning and teaching methodologies in diverse contexts.

Notes

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Conference on Social and Cognitive Aspects of Language Learning and Teaching, 12-14 April 2007 at the University of Auckland, New Zealand.

² Legends:

T: teacher

S4, S10: a student

Sss: students chorally

...: ellipsis

=: overlapping

{ }: narrating the situation

[...]: an event irrelevant to this discussion

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